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# 6/ Anti-gender Campaigns in Slovakia and the Dissolution of the Liberal-Conservative Alliance

*Jana Vargovčíková*

On a snowy evening in February 2018, ten thousand people gathered in the main street of Košice, the second largest city in Slovakia and situated in the south-east, near the border with Hungary. As in many other main squares around the country that evening, the city centre filled with crowds in what became the biggest demonstration since the 1989 Velvet Revolution. Participants came to express their indignation at the brutal assassination of the journalist Ján Kuciak, who had investigated a number of corruption schemes with links to government officials, and his fiancée on 21 February. At that very same moment, on the other end of Košice's main street, a smaller crowd gathered in front of the Constitutional Court and, at first sight, only seemed to have mistaken the gathering point of that day's event. Upon closer examination, however, the group of about forty people was centred around a priest and engaged in their weekly protest against the Istanbul Convention on violence against women and its supposed propagation of a 'gender ideology'. The juxtaposition of these two protests calls into question the place and salience of 'culture wars' in post-1989 Slovak history.

The parallel occurrence of the two mobilizations in the same space and time, literally as well as in terms of their political and social context, is revelatory. They represent two competing articulations of the priorities and threats in the country's future. On both sides of the street, participants claimed they had come for the well-being of their children, and, on both sides, their claims were framed as apolitical, driven by moral judgement and a sense of what is right. The competition between the two was not explicit, and their

audiences may even have overlapped in part. After all, the participants of the 2018 and 2019 protests under the main slogan ‘For a decent Slovakia’ were not all necessarily in favour of same-sex marriage or adoption rights.<sup>1</sup> In a country of five million, 75% declare themselves to be Christian<sup>2</sup> and more than 40% regularly attend religious services<sup>3</sup> – the Catholic Church, too, has been vocal in its opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage. However, it was the participants of the ‘anti-gender’ protest who devoted their time and energy to showing that morality politics should be the country’s top priority.

Why and how has the anti-liberal agenda gained such political salience in Slovakia over the past decade? To answer this question, this chapter analyses anti-gender campaigns within the context of Slovakia’s political evolution since the 1990s, in particular the dissolution of the liberal-conservative alliance following accession to the European Union. This approach complements the recent literature on new conservative politics and anti-gender mobilizations in Central Europe that focuses on slightly different questions, such as how opposition to gender equality has impacted actors in the women’s movement (Krizsán and Popa 2018) and how anti-gender mobilizations participate in the transformation of conservative politics in Europe (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). It also contributes to the literature on opposition to gender equality in Slovakia by looking at developments posterior to the 2014 constitutional change defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman and the 2015 referendum on same-sex marriage, adoption and sexual education in schools analysed elsewhere (Valkovičová 2017, Libáková et al. 2019, Ďurinová 2015).

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1 According to the 2019 Eurobarometer survey on the rights of LGBTI people, only 31% of respondents in Slovakia thought gay people should have the same rights as heterosexual people, a decrease of support for same-sex couples’ rights compared to 36% in a comparable 2015 Eurobarometer survey (Eurobarometer 2015; 2019).

2 As opposed to only 13.4% declaring themselves to be atheist (2011 census). Cf. Czech Republic, where a much more secularized ‘anti-gender’ campaign took place, with, according to the 2011 Czech census, only 13.9% declaring themselves to be of any religious denomination (not only Christian), 34.2% declaring themselves to be atheist and 45% not answering the question. For more on the Czech case, see the chapter by Ondřej Slačálek in this book.

3 According to a 2014 representative survey based on 1,215 respondents, 40.6% said they attended a religious service at least once per month, and one in five respondents said they attended a religious service every week (Tížik and Zeman 2017: 119).

While paying attention to the transnational character of anti-gender campaigns, it stresses the meaning-making work of national actors and the importance of national structures of political opportunity, in line with the approach of David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017, Paternotte and Kuhar 2018). In sum, this chapter looks at the anti-gender campaign as a case of mobilization among conservative elites and places it in the context of a history of alliances and competitions between liberalism and conservatism in Slovakia. This sheds fresh light on the anti-gender campaign not as a part of a backlash following a period of liberal consensus (Dawson and Hanley 2016) but rather an expression of the crisis and competition among conservative elites following the dissolution of the 1990s and early 2000s liberal-conservative alliance.

By 'culture wars', a term that has also been adopted by the actors of the disputes themselves in order to label the novel translation of political conflict into cultural conflict, we mean a particular set of strategies for framing disputes and mobilizing popular support, dramatizing disputes as 'a more encompassing struggle for the past and the future of a given community, aiming at creating an ideological hegemony by stressing the fundamental incompatibility of visions' (Trencsényi 2014). It is not used in the strong sense of nineteenth century 'conflicts that embrace virtually every sphere of social life: schools, universities, the press, marriage and gender relations, burial sites, associational culture, the control of public space, folk memory, symbols of nationhood' (Clark and Kaiser 2003) and so forth. In the Slovak case, the situation is rather one of elites using a culturalist framing of their agendas to fit, among other things, the 'apolitical politics' tradition of legitimate opposition to government or of legitimate civic mobilization. In a sense, then, the Slovak culture wars are much closer to some of the contemporary analyses of US culture wars as elite strategies of political polarization amid the tempered and not fully consistent attitudes of the public (Thomson 2010).

Positions and opinions on issues such as abortion or same-sex marriage are thus understood as temporary products of the strategies of political elites engaged in a competition for maintaining or

improving their position in the Slovak political field. In a political sociology perspective formulated by Pierre Bourdieu, the political field is understood as a particular space of social activity with its own rules and its own hierarchy of resources, valid for gaining and maintaining a position in the field that is relative to the position of other actors (Bourdieu 2001). In a space thus structured by the positions of actors competing for political power, the main type of capital determining the position in the political field is political capital, linked to the capacity of an actor to gather and mobilize popular support. The added value of this approach to studying the anti-gender campaigns is its serious consideration of the effects of competition for power on the scale and intensity of the mobilizations around moral issues. The perspective of the political field helps to explain in particular why a transnational campaign has a much stronger impact in one country than in another that is otherwise comparable, here in terms of religiosity and the role of the Catholic Church in society, for instance. It requires us to pay attention to the policy and moral entrepreneurs (Kingdon 1995; Becker 1963) of the anti-gender campaign, to where they come from, to how they connect morality politics to identity and memory politics in mobilizing popular indignation and, finally, to how they reframe political conflicts as cultural ones.

The empirical material the chapter is based on comprises a database of profiles and careers of the leaders of organizations engaged in the anti-gender campaign protesting the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, as well as a corpus of texts produced by key actors during the campaign and, in particular, among Catholic elites, including publications on social media. The main focus is on a period of mass mobilization regarding ‘gender ideology’, stretching from 2016 and ending with the parliamentary elections of February 2020.

The chapter is organized as follows: The first part tries to explain the success of the anti-gender campaign in Slovakia by situating it in the country’s recent political history, stressing its link to the end of the liberal-conservative alliance that brought the country into the European Union in 2004. The second part then presents the campaign’s main entrepreneurs, their backgrounds and the way in which

the national campaign used resources available via the transnational opposition movement to the Istanbul Convention at that time. The third and last part then analyses the anti-gender campaign also as a new site for the revival of the country's traditional East/West political cleavage.

### **Cooking the Culture Wars: Morality Politics, Politics of Memory and Politics of Identity**

The term 'gender ideology' at the centre of mobilizations was imported by the Slovak Catholic Church and activists around 2012 and appeared in 2013 in a pastoral letter that mentioned it as connected to a term introduced by Pope John Paul II in the 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, 'the culture of death':

Followers of the culture of death are coming up with a new 'gender ideology'. In its name, they want to enforce so-called gender equality. A person hearing this term for the first time thinks that it is a matter of recognizing the same rights and the same dignity for men and women. But these groups [...] want to convince us that none of us exists by nature as a man or as a woman, so they want to deprive a man of the right to the identity of a man and a woman of the right to the identity of a woman and family the right to the identity of the family, so that a man no longer feels like a man, a woman as a woman and, regarding marriage, so that it is no longer the God-blessed exclusive communion of man and woman, but they want to promote the communion of two men or two women on the same level as marriage. Thus, a kind of Sodom mockery arises, opposing God's will and preparing God's punishment. [...] The culture of death really threatens the existence of a nation. [...] We should therefore reject the manifestations of the culture of death in its infancy. Only a candidate who rejects a culture of death can get our vote in any election. To do otherwise would be to despise those of our ancestors who laid down their lives for the good of their homeland.<sup>4</sup>

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4 The pastoral letter was read out in churches around the country on 1 December 2013. Available at <https://www.kbs.sk/obsah/sekcia/h/dokumenty-a-vyhlasenia/p/pastierske-listy-konferencie-biskupov-slovenska/c/pastiersky-list-na-prvu-adventnu-nedelu-2013> (accessed September 10, 2020).

In depicting gender ideology as an acute threat to individuals' lifestyles, their understandings of themselves and the social recognition they enjoy, the Catholic Church embarked on an active campaign of both mass mobilization and lobbying. At the policy level, opposition to gender equality policies first concentrated on fighting a human rights strategy drafted for the years 2014–19, without however reaching mass mobilization. After a shift of focus in 2016 to a transnational policy goal – the Istanbul Convention (IC) on violence against women – activists and conservative political parties started asking for the country not to ratify the convention and succeeded in mobilizing thousands of people to sign petitions and attend public marches.

While all three axes in the culture wars referred to in the introduction of this volume – identity, the past and morality – have been present in Slovakia, morality related issues have probably been most successful in mass mobilization and most influential in their impact on the political field. This success of the anti-gender mobilizations needs to be read in the context of the relation between religion and nation-building in Slovak history<sup>5</sup> and in the context of crisis within the traditional Christian democratic political party.

### **Historical Antecedents to the Twenty-First Century Culture Wars: Religion as an Undisputed Foundation of National Identity in the Quarrel between Liberals and Conservatives**

Whereas the identification of Polish national identity with Catholicism seems to have taken root in the nineteenth century, fuelled by discrimination and prosecution of Catholics by occupying empires (Prussia, Russia), no such clear-cut identification was established in the Slovak case. Throughout the nineteenth century, Catholicism was the religion of Vienna and Calvinism that of Budapest. If a predominantly 'Slovak' denomination were to be found, then it was that of evangelical Christians. Their national engagement was explicit, for instance, when they refused to form a 'Protestant union' with

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5 In line with Anna Grzymala-Busse's (2015) approach explaining the influence of the Catholic Church and religion on politics.

Hungarian Calvinists, mostly in order to not compromise Slovak claims for more linguistic and national autonomy.<sup>6</sup> However, even though most of the political elites of the autonomist movement were evangelists, many of them priests,<sup>7</sup> the majority of the Slovak population was Catholic<sup>8</sup> and commonly voted for Hungarian candidates to the kingdom's parliament in Budapest, disregarding local Slovak candidates. No symmetry comparable to that of the Polish case existed therefore between Catholicism and national identity. Culture, mostly as manifested in language and religious tradition, was nevertheless defined as the core of Slovak demands for autonomy in a situation where individual cultural and religious rights were the maximum that Hungarian authorities were ready to acknowledge. As Pieter M. Judson pointed out, the focus of political struggles on culture was not only a logical consequence for a population with no history of past political autonomy but also due to the structure of political opportunities that Hungarian political authorities as well as its courts provided for claims of collective rights (Judson 2016). The latter did not recognize the political rights of Slovaks and refused to acknowledge them as a separate 'nationality' within the Kingdom of Hungary but did however recognize the plurilingual character of the state and individual cultural and religious rights. The claims of the autonomist movements thus centred around culture and made the possibility of learning in Slovak and speaking in Slovak within the local administration the main focus of political struggles.

The quarrel between liberals and conservatives at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was in part about the relation of religion and science, with liberals criticizing their dissociation and calling for rational judgment to be allowed into conflicts

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6 The first Slovak political protests (e.g., opposition to the Protestant union project in the 1830s, *Prestolný prosbopis*, 1842) were strongly linked to attempts at Magyarization through religion. Strong overlaps between claims of national autonomy and religious autonomy can thus be observed starting in the early nineteenth century (Škvarna 2007).

7 E.g., Ján Kollár, Jozef Miloslav Hurban, Michal Miloslav Hodža, Ľudovít Štúr and Samo Chalupka.

8 In 1890, Roman Catholics represented 47.8% of the population in the Slovak territory alongside 14.6% Calvinists, 13.6% Orthodox Christians, 11% Greek Catholics, 7.8% Lutherans and 4.7% Jews (Roman Holec in Ivantýšynová 2007: 65).



over religious issues. Perhaps even more importantly, the strife was about attitudes towards Western modernity and opposition to proponents of modernization of the Slovak society looking Westwards as well as pan-Slavists looking for a normative horizon and a path towards modernity through a community of Slavic peoples. Messianism, a particular political and literary style of romanticism ascribing to a nation a particular mission and usually dependent on the emergence of a messiah-like personality to lead the change, was characteristic of both. Michal Miloslav Hodža, a representative of the Slovak emancipation movement, argued, for instance, that the poverty experienced by the Slovak people was intended by God, that Slovaks suffered for other Slavic peoples and were thus taking part in a necessary ‘renaissance of Slavic peoples in a community of European nations assembled in a faith in Christ’ (Goszczyńska 2009), a Christian Austria being the chosen patria of Slavic peoples for Hodža, while others looked towards Russia.

In sum, whereas divisions over a westward or eastward orientation of national politics were already rife at the end of the nineteenth century<sup>9</sup>, opposition to a moral grounding in religious collective identity was never politically significant. According to the historian Ľubomír Lipták, a secular Slovak identity only emerged in the 1960s (Lipták 2019). In other words, liberals of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century were rarely secularists, and conservatives never went the full way in secularizing their political discourse and repertoires of action, unlike their Czech counterparts. After 1989 then, the relation between ‘culture’ and Christianity had not been politicized as a problem. Unlike in Poland, the society also did not become strongly divided on issues related to ‘morality politics’, and no political parties succeeded in elections with an outwardly anti-clerical programme<sup>10</sup>. This by no means suggests an uninterrupted

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9 Conflicts about the political conception of national emancipation already at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century comprise, for instance, opposition between the ‘national poet’, Svetozár Hurban Vajanský (1847–1916), and his liberal critics or the young intellectual elite which gathered around the review *Hlas* (1898–1904) against the Slovak national party created in 1871 (see Klobucký 2006).

10 Except for short-lived political projects such as the explicitly secular ANO party (represented in the parliament and in the second Dzurinda government in 2002–2006); cf. Wiosna, Ruch Palikota in Poland.

continuity of cleavages, collective identities and mobilization strategies from the mid-nineteenth century to the contemporary anti-gender campaigns. However, for post-1989 political elites, they nevertheless constituted an important resource and constraint.

### **The post-1989 Liberal-Conservative Alliance**

In the aftermath of the dissolution of Czechoslovakia (1993), and especially after the 1994 parliamentary elections, the Slovak government fell into the hands of Vladimír Mečiar, a prime minister at the helm of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS; Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko) described as semi-autocratic. Unlike its neighbours, Slovakia experienced severe setbacks regarding democracy and the rule of law during this period and saw the prospect of accession to the European Union driven away. The main political divide of the 1990s was thus between the supporters of Mečiar and his opponents coming from both left and right, liberal and conservative camps.

The Christian Democratic Movement (KDH; Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie) acted as the strongest opposition party to Mečiar<sup>11</sup> while harbouring competing groups of both more pragmatic and liberal Christian democrats and ultra-conservatives. In the 1998 parliamentary elections, Mečiar was defeated by a broad alliance of five opposition parties where representatives of KDH played key roles. The Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK; Slovenská demokratická koalícia), as a Slovak version of a liberal-conservative alliance for transition, governed until 2006, accomplishing EU accession and introducing a series of neoliberal reforms. Even after their division into a younger and more liberal party in 2000 – the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ; Slovenská demokratická a kresťanská únia) around Mikuláš Dzurinda – and a more conservative party dominated by pre-1989 Catholic dissidents (the remains

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11 Created in February 1990 by personalities among the Catholic dissidents, it came second in the June 1990 elections, with 19.21% after the broad coalition, Public Against Violence (VPN; Verejnosť proti násiliu) – made up of Velvet Revolution personalities and which would later transform itself into Vladimír Mečiar's HZDS – and their 29.3 5% (Bobula 2001).

of KDH), Christian democrats led the coalition government, embodying the desire of the majority of the population to accomplish the political transformation and ‘catch up’ with the West.

In sum, anti-Mečiarism acted as a ‘glue’,<sup>12</sup> binding liberals and conservatives together and dimming the relevance of morality politics that would have weakened the governing coalition. With the progressive dissolution of the liberal-conservative alliance, not unrelated to the accomplishment of a ‘return to Europe’, conservative elites found themselves looking for a new programme and turned to morality politics as a rediscovered ‘glue’, justifying a claim to represent the ‘Christian voice’ in politics in continuity with the Catholic dissidents’ pre-1989 pro-life positions.<sup>13</sup> The party was in crisis, weakened by years spent in government implementing neoliberal reforms (1998–2006). Some of its key figures quit in 2008 (František Mikloško, Vladimír Palko), 2012 (Daniel Lipšic) and 2014 (Ján Čarnogurský), opening the ground for competitors from the fringes of politics to claims of better representing the Christian voice. The radicalization of views on morality issues was paradoxically also prompted by the fact that conservatism, as opposed to cultural liberalism, had been the common feature, a constant, in all governing formations since 1989 and not a distinctive feature of KDH – Mečiar himself did not espouse culturally liberal politics and enjoyed the relative support of some of the Catholic Church’s representatives (Cardinal Ján Chryzostom Korec, for instance)<sup>14</sup>

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12 A reference to the metaphorical characterization of gender ideology as a symbolic ‘glue’ that holds together a varied coalition of social and political actors in the anti-gender campaigns of Central Europe, as used by Andrea Petó in a report on anti-gender politics in France, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, edited by Eszter Kováts and Maari Pöim (Kováts and Pöim 2015: 126–31).

13 Indeed, in reaction to the Czechoslovak communist government’s 1986 bill on abortions that aimed to liberalize them (women would no longer have to undergo an examination of their demand in front of a committee), Catholic dissidents gathered more than six thousand signatures calling on the Slovak prime minister of the federal republic to stop the bill. As the historian Miloslav Szabó observes (Szabó 2020: 99–100), the petitioners used the discourse of human rights (of the unborn), mirroring use of the same discourse by the communist government (rights of women).

14 Cardinal Ján Chryzostom Korec supported Mečiar’s government, whereas the then president of the Conference of the Bishops of Slovakia, Bishop Rudolf Baláž, was critical of Mečiar and became the target of media attacks and propaganda.

even though, already at the time, ultra-conservative groups were not happy with Mečiar's strategic use of religious references.<sup>15</sup> In the 2016 elections, for the first time since 1990, KDH lost all of its seats in the parliament. This moment coincides with the beginning of an intense mobilization against the Istanbul Convention. The campaign, initiated by a coalition of conservative civic organizations called the Alliance for the Family (Aliancia za rodinu), linked morality politics with discourses on identity and the past in what became one of the most persistent and successful mass mobilizations of the post-1989 history.

### **Politics of Memory and Identity as Resources for Morality Politics**

Opposition to 'gender ideology' in the anti-IC campaign has been justified by references to the past (and future) of the polity, making memory veins (*gisements mémoriels*; Bonnard and Mink 2010) a resource for its entrepreneurs and opponents. Periods, events or places that are part of a collective memory are thus represented as related to contemporary issues in order to mobilize the public. As Mink and Neumayer (2013) summarize, 'Certain representations of historical facts, internalised through formal or informal socialisation (schooling, family), have the collective mobilisation potential to enable the group making strategic use of them to obtain the political influence it desires.' Similarly, representations of what differentiates insiders of a community from its Others are mobilized in anti-gender campaigns.

The mobilizing potential of memory veins such as the communist past, the 1989 Velvet Revolution or the creation of the First Slovak Republic in 1939, a fascist satellite state of Nazi Germany, thus depends on the meanings these periods are ascribed at present. In this sense, 'history is welcome in the present' (Mink 2008: 469). As in other countries, anti-gender campaigners have labelled

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15 In a letter to Mečiar from October 1996, Anton Čulen, an ultra-conservative activist, a collaborator with the Catholic dissident personality Anton Selecký and, later, founder of the Alliance for Sunday (a member organization of the anti-gender coalition since 2016), criticized Mečiar's attacks on KDH and the Church, calling him a 'neo-communist' (Letter from Anton Čulen to the Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar, 24 October 1996, doc. No. 2212/96-Se, Slovak National Archive, archive of the Office of the Government (*Úrad vlády*), box 208).

organizations promoting gender equality as ‘totalitarian’, following in the footsteps of the social engineering policies of the communist regime. On the other hand, defenders of gender equality policies have labelled the charismatic priest leader of the anti-gender campaign, Marián Kuffa, as a ‘clerofascist’ in reference to the role of the clergy in the WWII Slovak state, presided over by a Catholic priest, Jozef Tiso.

However, parallels between Marián Kuffa and early twentieth-century priest-politicians also appear in a positive sense, reflecting the ongoing strife in Slovak society over the interpretation of the role of the Slovak Popular Party (SLS, *Slovenská ľudová strana*) in governing the WWII fascist state in Slovak history. For instance, one of the post-1989 leaders of KDĽ, former Catholic dissident and Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic (1991–92) Ján Čarnogurský, compared Marián Kuffa to the priest-politician Andrej Hlinka, the founder and leader of the Slovak Popular Party until his death in 1938. In a Facebook post, Čarnogurský wrote that Kuffa’s methods of mobilization strongly reminded him of what his father had told him about Hlinka’s methods – combining masses and public marches – then going on to suggestively remind that Hlinka had built the strongest Slovak political party to date.<sup>16</sup> As Hlinka was not alive for the acceptance of Hitler’s offer to Josef Tiso of 13 March 1939 to create a Slovak state carved out of interwar Czechoslovakia, this positive comparison bore less controversy than the negative comparisons of Kuffa to Tiso himself as president of the WWII Slovak state. Some of the anti-IC campaigning organizations have been less careful, however. The Alliance for Sunday (*Aliancia za nedelu*), advocating for the introduction of a work-free Sunday, celebrated the eightieth anniversary of the Slovak state’s creation in 2019 by reproducing mottos of the fascist state and portraits of both Hlinka and Tiso.

The 1989 revolution and its symbols also impregnate the political strategies of anti-gender campaigners and their opponents. The pro-life organization Forum for Life (*Fórum života*), for instance, used the thirtieth anniversary of the Velvet Revolution (November 17) to

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<sup>16</sup> Facebook post, May 2, 2018.

present the fight against abortions as a necessary continuation of the 1989 struggles. By organizing a march on 2 November 2019 named 'A Candle for Unborn Children', it referred to the candle as a symbol of the pacific opposition to the communist regime in Slovakia, and especially to the thirtieth anniversary of the candle demonstration of March 1988 in Bratislava when Catholic dissidents organized a gathering for religious and civic freedoms, one of the most important public manifestations of opposition to the communist regime in Slovakia.

Identity politics has also been mobilized by parts of the political elite to justify opposition to the Istanbul Convention. One of the new ultra-conservative parties created in the wake of the anti-gender campaigns said they sought to 'protect Europe' simultaneously against 'the Islamization of Europe' thus preventing it from 'turning into Eurabia', and against 'fascist liberalism', the latter comprising 'abortions, euthanasia and then welcoming migrants [...], gender ideology and feminism, [...] pushing for the selfish interests of minorities [...] and a bureaucratic state apparatus controlling everyone and everything'.<sup>17</sup>

More secular political actors linked opposition to the IC and opposition to migration as well. The then Prime Minister Róbert Fico, for instance, famously justified his government's decision of February 2018 not to ratify the IC by stating that if Slovak women needed protection, it was first and foremost protection from migrants:

I understand one of the motives of the Istanbul Convention is to have a clear defence of women's rights. All the more so because Europeans are increasingly made up of migrants who often carry cultural and social patterns from their countries of origin. The woman is often seen as inferior in these, and the man is allowed to treat her as he pleases, playing both the role of a judge and of executioner in the family.<sup>18</sup>

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17 Dominik, T., 'Islamizácia Európy sa dá odvrátiť konkrétnymi rozhodnutiami', *Svetlo sveta*, March 2, 2019, <https://www.svetlosveta.sk/najnovsieblogy/islamizacia-euro-py-sa-da-odvratit-konkretnymi-rozhodnutiami/> (accessed 7 September 2020).

18 'Fico nedá súhlas na ratifikáciu Istanbulského dohovoru, prekáža mu definícia manželstva', *SME*, February 22, 2018, <https://domov.sme.sk/c/20766569/fico-odmietol-ratifikovat-istanbulsky-dohovor-v-sucasnej-podobе.html#ixzz5X94mZavc> (accessed September 7, 2020).

Another secular politician using the IC controversy to communicate his attitude on the issue of migration was the leader of the neoliberal Freedom and Solidarity (SaS; Sloboda a Solidarita) party who used the same argument but in support of ratification; Richard Sulík called on the government to ratify the IC by referring to its protection of Slovak society from ‘foreign cultural influences [stating forced marriage, child marriage and genital mutilation] that come to Europe through migration, and against which Europe must fight as one man’.<sup>19</sup>

The third type of political actor that founded their position towards the IC on an identity-centred discourse was the radical right party People’s Party – Our Slovakia (LSNS; Ludová strana – Naše Slovensko), led by Marián Kotleba, which stressed the need to protect Slovak society from Western liberalism and, even more particularly, from the ‘perversities’ coming from ‘the West’. With no mentions of God, the Church’s policies or the Pope’s declarations, the party’s MPs and MEPs joined the fight against the IC to protect ‘our civilisation’ against ‘neo-Marxist’ influences that go against common sense; ‘normal’, ‘traditional’ and ‘rational’ notions of two biological sexes; and ‘natural roles’, such as the that of a ‘strong, protective man providing for his family’ and of a ‘woman giving life to children and bringing them up’.<sup>20</sup> However, the party was a rather pragmatic latecomer to the fight against ‘gender ideology’<sup>21</sup> once it realized what mobilization potential it harboured.

### **Protecting ‘Traditional Family’: The Mobilization Strategy of Old and New Conservative Elites**

The first mass mobilization campaigns on morality issues started in 2013 around the definition of marriage. The Catholic Church asked for an amendment to the constitution so as to define marriage as

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19 ‘Sulík podporil Istanbulský dohovor a žiada Fica, aby ho nasledoval’, *SME*, September 13, 2017. <https://domov.sme.sk/c/20648366/sulik-podporil-istanbulsky-dohovor-a-ziada-fica-aby-ho-nasledoval.html> (accessed September 7, 2020).

20 The speech of MP Milan Mazurek (LSNS) in the Slovak National Council, 43<sup>rd</sup> Session, March 29, 2019.

21 The party’s 2016 electoral programme, while anti-IC petition and marches were already well underway, still bore no mention of gender ideology.

a union of a man and a woman, thus barring the route to a potential legal recognition of same-sex marriage. At the time, the country had been governed since 2006 (with a brief interlude in 2010–12) by a secular social democratic party also described as populist, SMER-SD,<sup>22</sup> that was a proponent of a separation between church and state at the beginning of the 2000s but not once it came back to power in 2012. Even though the party's leader had explicitly presented himself as a 'fierce atheist' and remained neutral on a number of morality issues for a long time, at this point the party made a concession to the Church and partnered with KDH to adopt the proposed constitutional change in the parliament in 2014. In the years that followed, the organizers pushed the agenda further and asked for a clear exclusion of any possibility of same-sex marriage and adoptions. This time, however, the lead role was taken over by a coalition of Christian civic organizations established for the purpose in 2014 named Alliance for the Family.

At that point, KDH had already undergone a series of crises and lost most of its prominent figures (see above). The party had then been in opposition since 2012 and, prior to that, part of the right-wing coalition government led by Iveta Radičová, a short-lived (2010–2012) government that embodied the weakening of the liberal-conservative compromise. While the party was torn apart as regards its political positioning, a new type of leadership emerged around issues related to the defence of a 'traditional family', using existing the anti-gender policies of the Catholic Church and mobilization tools such as Marches for Life, mass petitions and social media campaigns. Unlike the divided leadership of the traditional party, the new leadership emerged from pro-life organizations, charismatic communities of worship, the peripheries of KDH and from local-level politics. Taking

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22 *Smer* is not an acronym but the Slovak word for 'direction'. SD stands for 'social democracy'. The party was founded in 1999 mostly by former members of the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL Strana demokratickej ľavice), a party which had assembled reformist communists from the pre-1989 period. Its social democratic character mainly resides in its stress on the importance of the welfare state, which has however increasingly coincided with a nationalist discourse and a culturally conservative discourse that have inspired observers to call the party populist (see the introduction to this book for a well-founded criticism of such a confusion, however).



morality issues out of the realm of disputes on the future of the KDH party, this emerging leadership contributed to framing them as a matter of culture, identity and moral consciousness, thus to framing political conflicts as moral and cultural issues.

### **A New Christian Political Elite Rising from Organized Civil Society**

In 2014, Alliance for the Family launched a petition calling for a national referendum on ‘the protection of the traditional family’. Their campaign gathered more than four hundred thousand signatures, and even though the referendum was unsuccessful – invalid due to insufficiently high turnout (21.41%) – it was an empowering campaigning experience for a wide range of activists. Approximately a year after the failed referendum, the organizers shifted focus to a different target: the Istanbul Convention on the prevention of violence against women. Although ultra-conservative interest groups had already lobbied against the IC in 2013, winning a postponement of the ratification process from the government, a public campaign was only started in 2015 – the repertoire of action adopted for the marriage referendum campaign (petition, wide coalition of civic organizations), as well as the experience of the first Marches for Life in 2013 and 2015, was thus mobilized towards a new goal.

This time, the Alliance for the Family created an even wider coalition of campaigners called the Slovak Convention for the Family (SCFF; Slovenský dohovor za rodinu). A number of representatives of the SCFF have since become quasi-political or political figures. The alliance’s leader, Anton Chromík, a pro-life lawyer once close to KDH who also graduated in theology, emerged as one of the new representatives of the Christian voice in the public space. Cofounder and spokesperson of the alliance Anna Verešová, otherwise a pro-life civic activist and social worker, was elected MP in 2016 on the list of OLaNO, the ideologically loose, centrist, populist party of businessman MP Igor Matovič that had already brought to the parliament a number of conservative personalities from the organized civil society. In 2019, she left for KDH and has since been a regional deputy. Eva Grey, a doctor, university professor and pro-life activist

married to a former advisor of one of the leading KDH figures Ján Čarnogurský, was also an active leader in the alliance and a local KDH politician (2010–14) before being elected as vice-president of the party in 2016. Often, other leaders of the SCFF's member organizations were lawyers, university professors or doctors with multiple forms of engagement in the sphere of Christian associations, many having a spouse equally active in one of the associations. Overlaps with partisan politics were frequent, mainly with the two parties already mentioned, OĽaNO and KDH. Multiple membership and political engagement, implying a familiarity with campaigning as well as the political capital necessary for successful lobbying, were thus frequent in the population of those contributing to the anti-gender campaign.

As regards the difference from the earlier 2014–15 referendum campaign, in 2016, the Alliance for the Family joined forces with Marián Kuffa, a publicly known priest from Žakovce, a small village in eastern Slovakia. The charismatic priest was already famous thanks to stories published in the press, documentary films and TV reports about the social and charity work he had been carrying out for a community of the socially excluded. At the time he entered the campaign, he was widely acclaimed for the work that his centre, the Institute of Christ the High Priest, had accomplished with local Roma communities, former convicts and other marginalized groups. Upon entering cooperation with the SCFF, Marián Kuffa started preaching profusely about the dangers of 'gender ideology', organizing marches and distributing a petition. However, according to the priest's own account, one of the persons who motivated him to take up the issue was his brother, Štefan Kuffa, director of a hospice in a small eastern Slovakian town and, at the time, an elected MP on OĽaNO's party list (2012). When the campaign against the IC started, Štefan Kuffa was going through a serious crisis in his political career. He faced de facto exclusion from the OĽaNO party<sup>23</sup> and

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23 Formally, it was he who left the party after tensions with the party leader Igor Matovič and especially after the party presidency decided not to put him on the electoral list in the 2016 parliamentary elections. This followed an episode of public discrediting of Kuffa after he had used his legal parliamentary immunity in a private

subsequently failed in an attempt to get re-elected in March 2016 on KDH's list.

The third key actor in the mobilization against 'gender ideology' was the Catholic Church. The Conference of Bishops of Slovakia (Konferencia biskupov Slovenska) did not quite replicate the belligerent rhetoric of the SCFF, yet it provided financial and public support to the campaign. Large format banners functioning as invitations to demonstrations against the IC were placed at the entrances of churches, and the Church also used its specific modes of action to lobby the government and legitimize the campaigners, such as pastoral letters and official meetings with government representatives. Such use of pastoral letters was not new. In 2002, the Conference of Bishops had warned against EU policies on the rights of LGBT individuals (Valkovičová 2017). The Conference of Bishops was also one of the main organizers of the Marches for Life taking place in Košice (in 2013, with an estimated 80,000 participants) and Bratislava (in 2015 and 2019, each time with approx. 50,000 participants) and issued pastoral letters inviting Catholics to take part in the march. A week before the 2015 referendum, another pastoral letter called upon voters to oppose same-sex marriage, same-sex couples' adoption rights and sexual education in schools.

These positions then made the Church a natural ally of anti-gender campaigners. On 25 November 2016, the president of the Conference of Bishops published a declaration against the IC asking the government to stop its ratification. On 13 February 2018, the Catholic Church was supported by ten other Christian churches (unlike in the Czech Republic where Protestant churches principally stayed out of the campaign) in its official call on the prime minister to stop IC ratification.

In less than two years of campaigning, the organizers obtained a declaration from Prime Minister Róbert Fico that the IC would not be

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conflict - in a dispute with the neighbours of his son's illegally constructed house in a north-eastern Slovakian village, he was said to have physically attacked an elderly lady who then responded with a slap, following which Kuffa sued her for attacking a state official.

ratified since it was ‘contrary to the definition of marriage as the union of a man and a woman’.<sup>24</sup> The prime minister announced his decision at a press conference on the day following the assassination of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, 22 February 2018. The campaign continued asking for a guarantee that the ratification process would be stopped. The NGO coalition also found allies in the parliament and obtained a resolution, massively approved by 101 of the 133 MPs present, against the ratification of the IC.<sup>25</sup> The parliamentary resolution did not have implications in legal terms but was an indisputable demonstration of the campaigners’ capacity to bargain with political parties.

After this success and in the wake of EU elections in May 2019 as well as in preparation for the country’s parliamentary elections in February 2020, some of the campaigning organizations shifted their focus to the pro-life agenda that had disappeared from sight since the launch of the anti-IC campaign in 2016. In continuity with their success from spring 2019, the organizations were effective in compelling two of the three governing parties, SMER and the nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS; Slovenská národná strana), to propose a bill on restraining access to abortion.<sup>26</sup>

In sum, the anti-gender campaign gained such political salience in Slovakia due to the decline in the political capital of traditional political elites representing the ‘Christian voice’, which opened avenues for new actors to compete for their position in the political field, and thanks to the proximity of existing Christian organizations’ leaders to politics and, therefore, their access to the resources necessary to take their struggle to the national public sphere. The modes of action,

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24 ‘Fico nedá súhlas na ratifikáciu Istanbulského dohovoru, prekáža mu definícia manželstva’, *SME*, February 22, 2018, <https://domov.sme.sk/c/20766569/fico-odmietol-ratifikovat-istanbulsky-dohovor-v-sucasnej-podobе.html#ixzz5X94mZavc> (accessed September 7, 2020).

25 The National Council of the Slovak Republic is a unicameral parliament composed of 150 MPs.

26 Abortion is legal in Slovakia until the twelfth week of pregnancy (as of April 2021). However, the conditions for access to abortion are already relatively restrictive compared to other European countries, with abortion not reimbursable under health insurance unless required for medical reasons (the cost can be around €250–350). Moreover, abortion is declined by some public hospitals with reference to a conscience clause, pushing women into private medical clinics.

the discourse and the justification for their demands cannot, however, be reduced to national dynamics, nor to the context-dependent blend of moral, identity and memory motives. The transnational circulation of the anti-gender agenda also contributed to the specific form of the anti-IC campaign in Slovakia.

### **Transnational Circulation of Discourse, Mobilization Strategies and Legitimacy**

The anti-gender campaign has its roots in the official policies of the Catholic Church, which has tried, since the middle of the 1990s, to counter policies on gender equality affecting some of its dogmas, such as the male/female complementarity as created by God. It became active on the issue particularly after the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo that called for actions on women's reproductive health and rights, including voluntary family planning, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. The 2003 publication by the Pontifical Council of the Family, *Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions*, then set the terms of the battle that Catholic organizations started with the support of the Church mostly in Latin America and Europe (Garbagnoli and Prearo 2017; Garbagnoli 2016) in what has been described as a transnational anti-gender countermovement (Corredor 2019).

Since the 2013 pastoral letter mentioning 'gender ideology' as a threat, many activities of the Slovak anti-gender campaign organizers have emulated foreign models and are not an exception to the general tendency of the circulation of visual material and mottos in Europe, as observed by Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (2018: 8). The repertoire of action of the Slovak Convention for the Family builds on the preceding introduction of public marches as a mode of action in the Catholic activist repertoire. The first March for Life was organized in 2013 – in the United States, for example, the first was in 1974 – by the Church and a coalition of pro-life organizations, the Forum for Life, whose young leaders claimed they were inspired by marches organized abroad and wanted to try organizing them domestically.<sup>27</sup>

A transnational dimension of the campaign is also manifest in what Grossman and Saurugger call the internal methods of lobbying (Grossman and Saurugger 2006: 83–87), such as expertise and knowledge production. In the written documents of the Conference of Bishops asking the government to stop the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the arguments copy those of Vatican policy statements. ‘A return to a Christian anthropology’ is thus proposed as a response to ‘the pseudoscience of the gender ideology’ in the common declaration of Christian churches at a meeting with Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini in Badín on 4 March 2019. The Christian anthropology argument appears on several occasions in connection to a rebuttal of ‘gender ideology’, for example, at the international meeting of the commissions for Catholic education in Budapest on 14 January 2015, where Willem Jacobus Eijk, archbishop of Utrecht, delivered the lecture ‘Christian Anthropology and Gender Ideology’, translated into Slovak and published on the website of the Slovak Conference of Bishops. At a number of policy conferences of Christian organizations, speakers are invited from abroad with a legitimizing effect on both the goals of the campaign and the authority of its local organizers.<sup>28</sup> Literature on the question of family and gender also comes almost exclusively from foreign authors,<sup>29</sup> unlike in Poland, for instance, where local

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27 ‘Rozhovor s Tomášom Kováčikom, hovorcom Národného pochodu za život’, *Liga Pár páru*, <https://www.lpp.sk/informacie-o-cookies/2-nezaradene/518-rrzhovor-s-tomasom-kovacikom-hovorcom-narodneho-pochodu-za-zivot> (accessed September 3, 2020).

28 The April 26 2013 conference organized by the Conference of Bishops on gender ideology hosted, among others, Msgr. Mario Giordana, Msgr. Ignacio Carrasco de Paula, Msgr. Jean Laffitte, Prof. Francesco D’Agostino and Prof. Helen M. Alvaré. In October 2018, Prof. Raymond de Souza, an international mission delegate to the world’s largest pro-life organization Human Life International, presented a lecture on gender ideology in Catholic centres and churches in Bratislava and Košice.

29 The following works, among others, have been translated into Slovak: *Gender: A Controversial Issue*, a volume by Tony Anatrella, Monsignor and Vatican advisor as well as a psychoanalyst practicing ‘gay therapy’, published in 2013 by the Catholic publishing house Spolok sv. Vojtecha – VOJTECH; the document ‘Truth about the Love of Man: Fundamental Views on Marital Love, Gender Ideology and Family-Related Legislation’ by the Spanish Conference of Bishops, originally published in 2012; or *What is Marriage?* by Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson and Robert P. George, respectively a PhD student in philosophy, a US legal scholar and a fellow of the conservative think-tank the Heritage Foundation, published by the Collegium of Anton Neuwirth,

authors, often women, have published books on the issue and championed the anti-gender discourse.<sup>30</sup>

However, the marches of the SCFF have been different from Marches for Life both in Slovakia and in other European countries: The marches are combined with actions from an explicitly religious repertoire. They are usually preceded by a mass in a local church and headed by a priest carrying a cross. Participants hold an image of the Virgin Mary at the back and are asked to pray the rosary all along the route. The Slovak anti-IC marches thus contrast with the secularized form of pro-life and pro-family marches analysed by Kuhar and Patternote (2018: 10), an analysis based on a large study of European anti-gender campaigns that try to display ‘a colourful, youthful and festive outlook, far away from stereotypical images of conservative mobilizations and reminiscent of Pride Parades’.

Whereas the use of marches and legitimization by international links and expertise echoed strongly with the instruments of anti-gender campaigns in other countries, two other instruments seemed to appear less frequently elsewhere: electoral mobilization by the Catholic Church and the creation of new political parties. At the beginning of the campaign in the run-up to the 2016 parliamentary elections, the Catholic Church had published the ‘Decalogue for a Better Slovakia’: a set of ten demands addressed to political parties that were also supposed to work as indicators for voters. The list included withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention alongside other goals, such as the financing of religious education and stricter legislation on the prohibition of Sunday work.

The second particularity of Slovak anti-gender campaigns, the creation of new political parties, needs to be analysed in the context of the evolution of the Slovak political landscape.

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a programme created in 2009 aimed at the education and socialization of young Catholic elites. Only one short publication authored by a Slovak author has been published on this issue, Mária Raučínová’s *Gender alebo rodová ideológia* (Gender or gender ideology; Bratislava, Don Bosco, 2014).

30 Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk mention journalists Agnieszka Niewońska (*Raport o gender w Polsce*), Magdalena Żuraw (*Idiotyzmy feminizmu*), Marzena Nykiel (*Putapka Gender*) and the anti-gender celebrities Beata Kempa and Małgorzata Terlikowska (Graff and Korolczuk 2017: 183).

## **Reconfiguration of the National Political Field as a Result of the Anti-gender Campaign**

The campaign can be said to have prompted a number of political actors to adopt positions on gender equality and LGBT rights. Two effects can be observed in particular. First, a shift of the governing, secular social democratic party and almost all other parliamentary parties to conservative positions in an effort to maintain or amplify their political capital. Secondly, the creation of new Catholic political parties as competitors of the traditional KDH, which was losing popular support and thus losing its political capital. The anti-gender campaign lent budding new leaders a justification for the resulting fragmentation by arguing that a fight without compromises against gender ideology was necessary.

### **Left-Right Shift to Conservatism**

Unlike in Poland or Hungary, the Slovak government's strongest party at the time (SMER-SD) had a rather secular identity and had not used religious symbols for power legitimization. Gradually, however, the positions of SMER made concessions on morality policies<sup>31</sup> to the Catholic Church a part of the party's attempt not to lose the support of an important part of the electorate that the Church could influence at a time when the party's support was waning, as well as to trade in these concessions to the Church in exchange for the support of KDH on some of the government's bills. The February 2018 declaration of the prime minister on the non-ratification of the Istanbul Convention, as well as its previous support for the inscription of a man/woman definition of marriage into the constitution in 2014 represented such concessions. When confronted with further IC-related demands, as, for instance, it was at the international meeting of bishops in Bratislava in September 2018, the prime minister reminded the bishops of the 2014 and 2018 concessions as justification of why more would not be possible. When six months later, in the midst of the presidential campaign, the parliament

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<sup>31</sup> In the narrow sense of policies opening 'conflicts over first principle' – when life begins, when and how life ends, etc. For a review of approaches to defining morality policies, see Knill 2013.



adopted another anti-IC resolution, this was perceived as yet another victory of the campaigners and the Church. The latter in turn supported the SMER candidate in the presidential elections (EU Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič) instead of the pre-1989 Catholic dissident František Mikloško. This came as confirmation of the strategy of the Church to engage in bargaining with the government rather than support weak albeit Christian opposition parties.

The pragmatic shift of SMER to conservative positions did not equal it becoming Christian democratic, however. The justifications given by party representatives or election candidates for conservative policy decisions only argued in favour of a minimal version of Christianity – a need to respect the country’s Christian traditions. When the party’s 2019 presidential candidate, EU Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič, declared he was not in favour of IC ratification and not in favour of same-sex couple adoptions, he justified his decision by saying that it was a way of ‘doing away with unnecessary tensions in society [...] and confirming the value-orientation of Slovakia based on the respect of traditional values’.<sup>32</sup> This position gained him the support even of the ultra-conservative Kuffa brothers in the second round of the presidential elections against the openly liberal candidate Zuzana Čaputová, who won the elections.

Similarly, the anti-gender campaign saw all except two liberal parties<sup>33</sup> make a pragmatic shift to conservative positions. The government coalition party SNS, a nationalist conservative party, made the issue one of its priorities, and opposition parties Sme Rodina (We Are Family) and OLaNO (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities) equally supported the February 2018 call of the Conference of Bishops to stop IC ratification, calling it a ‘Trojan horse polarizing the European Union as well as the society’.<sup>34</sup>

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32 ‘Kňaz Kuffa sa stretol so Šefčovičom a vyjadril mu podporu’, *Postoj*, March 27, 2019, <https://www.postoj.sk/41940/knaz-kuffa-sa-stretol-so-sefcovicom-a-vyjadril-mu-podporu> (accessed June 30, 2021).

33 Zuzana Čaputová’s centrist liberal party, Progressive Slovakia (PS; Progresívne Slovensko) – winner of the 2019 presidential elections – and Freedom and Solidarity, the right-wing neoliberal party.

34 ‘OLaNO: Istanbulský dohovor je trójsky kôň, polarizuje Úniu aj verejnosť’, *SME*, November 25, 2016, <https://domov.sme.sk/c/20393427/olano-istanbulsky-dohovor-je-trojsky-kon-polarizuje-uniu-aj-verejnost.html> (accessed June 30, 2021).

Overall, then, the co-occurrence of the anti-gender campaign with a series of elections tested the flexibility of political parties, both government and opposition, on ‘morality issues’ as well as their readiness to engage in trade-offs with the Catholic Church and Christian organizations. Confronted with the mobilization potential of Christian movements around morality issues, secular parties such as SMER or OĽaNO were prompted to adopt the anti-gender agenda in a secularized way, stressing the importance of respecting tradition and Slovak culture and thus continuing the history of culturalizing politics.

A brief remark on the relation between populism and national conservatism in the Slovak case is helpful here. As suggested in the introduction to this book, the rising importance of the two tendencies in the production of the political offer need not overlap. Populism, understood as a particular type of political rhetoric distrustful of traditional political parties and ‘established elites’ and proposing new and more direct ways of representation through actors who often appear as outsiders to the political field (Urbainati 2019), was visible beyond the national conservative groups. The OĽaNO party that won the parliamentary elections of February 2020 is led by entrepreneur and MP Igor Matovič who built his reputation on fighting corruption at a local level of government through methods typical of civic activism and implemented methods of online voting to determine the programme priorities of his party, for instance. Coinciding with major political scandals in the country, the anti-corruption rhetoric brought Matovič to government as a leader of a loose and ideologically non-defined political group – a ‘business firm party’ (Just and Charvát 2017) rather than a traditional party. Before him, anti-corruption rhetoric had already won the country’s presidential election for another entrepreneur presenting himself as an outsider surrounded by experts, stressing moral integrity, experience and contact with ‘regular people’ rather than a political programme: Andrej Kiska (president from 2014 to 2019 and founder of the party For the People; *Za ľudí*). Elements of what some scholars have called techno-populism, an anti-partisan and anti-ideology rhetoric combined with a ‘technocratic’ conception of politics aimed

at the resolution of ‘practical’ people’s problems (Bickerton and Invernizzi 2018), had thus found an incarnation in Slovak politics quite removed from the agenda and rhetoric of the national conservatives. Techno-populist politicians such as Matovič or Kiska have not been part of the key structural dynamic behind the rise of the anti-gender agenda – the competition for monopoly representation of conservative values in politics – although they were prompted, along with other parties, to adopt a position on the IC.

### **Competition over the ‘Christian Voice’ Monopoly in Politics: The Creation of New Parties**

‘Mass mobilization’ through the Church and religious organizations was also fuelled by ongoing struggles over the monopoly of the Christian voice in Slovak politics. In addition to the pragmatic shift of the government party to conservative positions, the second major effect of the anti-gender campaign was that it contributed to the fragmentation of the Christian democratic political space in at least three distinct directions, each forming alliances with a different segment of Slovak partisan politics: a conservative-liberal direction that entered pre-electoral cooperation with a centre-left liberal party; an ultra-conservative pro-European stream that formed an alliance with OLaNO, the centrist populist anti-corruption party; and an ultra-conservative nationalist direction that allied itself with the radical Right.

The conservative-liberal direction was taken by a renewed KDH: After its historic failure in the 2016 parliamentary elections, the party was to elect a new leader. The two main choices were the ultra-conservative pro-life MEP Richard Vašečka and the civic activist and entrepreneur Alojz Hlina. Both had entered politics through OLaNO, which attests to that party’s role in bringing new Christian elites into national-level politics. Yet Hlina represented a vision more centred around social policies than around morality policies, and thus more flexible on issues such as abortion or same-sex couples’ rights. The relation to liberalism was at the heart of the party’s 2016 internal debates. One of the ministers of the 1998–2004 liberal-conservative government embodying the anti-Mečiarist alliance (Ivan Šimko), for instance, disagreed with proposals for the party to wage

a war against liberalism. It was the more liberal candidate who won the vote for leadership and thus opened the doors for a repositioning of KDH while offering opportunities for the more conservative groups to assume the agenda marginalized by the new party leader and to create new parties.

The ultra-conservative traditionalist direction was taken by the first new party, the Christian Union (Kresťanská únia), founded by MEP and renowned pro-life advocate Anna Záborská, who left KDH after the party failed to offer her a position on the electoral list for the 2019 EU elections, and OLaNO MEP Richard Vaščka, the unsuccessful 2016 candidate for the KDH presidency. Záborská has mainly used her social and international capital to build her position as a new conservative leader. Born in 1948 and a doctor by training, Záborská had been a member of KDH since its creation in 1990 and an MP/MEP since 1998. Importantly, she always insisted on her political engagement being linked to the legacy of her father, Anton Neuwirth. Neuwirth, a former 1950s political prisoner, was a prominent figure of KDH, its honorary president (1994–2004) and MP (1992–94), then ambassador to the Vatican. At the EU level, Záborská had gained a strong reputation as an ultra-conservative activist, not least due to her mobilization during the opposition to the 2013 Report on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, known more popularly as the Estrela report and finally rejected by the European Parliament after a very close vote on 10 December 2013 – celebrated as an important ultra-conservative victory. Running for her new party in the 2019 EU elections, she received the public support of a number of personalities and celebrities who systematically mentioned her European capital and reputation. Among them was the German anti-gender celebrity Gabriele Kuby, author of a number of publications translated across Europe. Although the party did not win any seats in the 2019 EU elections, they enabled it to measure its electoral potential (3.9%). Ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections, the new party then concluded an electoral partnership with two populist centrist parties: OLaNO and Sme Rodina and entered the government.

Finally, the ultra-conservative nationalist direction of an alliance within the radical Right was taken up by another newly formed

party created by former OĽaNO MP Štefan Kuffa (the brother of Marián Kuffa, the priest) and an ultra-conservative former member of KDH, Peter Molda. It also included the well-known figures Marián Tkáč and Viliam Oberhauser from the patriotic organization *Matica slovenská*,<sup>35</sup> which used to support Vladimír Mečiar's government in the 1990s. The party, Christian Democracy – Life and Prosperity (KDŽP; Kresťanská demokracia – život a prosperita, later renamed ŽIVOT – NS), entered the competition for the Catholic voter by trying to convert the popular support of the anti-gender campaign into electoral politics. It first partnered with the nationalist party SNS (September 2019) and later with the radical right party led by Marián Kotleba (ĽSNS) that had grown out of the neo-Nazi party Slovak Brotherhood (*Slovenská pospolitosť*) after the latter was banned in 2006 by the Supreme Court. ĽSNS first obtained regional mandates in 2013, then entered the Parliament in 2016. The representatives of the new KDŽP party came mainly from either KDH, OĽaNO or HZDS backgrounds. KDŽP thus presented itself as bringing together 'national and Christian forces' and as 'doing in politics what the priest Kuffa is saying theologically'.<sup>36</sup> In the 2020 parliamentary elections, its candidates were elected on the list of the radical Right, and a number of activists close to the Kuffa brothers also ran on the lists of the radical Right in regional elections.<sup>37</sup>

However, through these partnerships, rather than converting campaign support to party support, KDŽP and the Kuffa brothers became estranged from other conservative milieux. Conservative media and personalities<sup>38</sup> as well as the Catholic Church progres-

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35 The Slovak variant of the patriotic organizations founded in the region in the nineteenth century (cf. *Matica moravská*, *Matica česká*, *Matica hrvatska*, *Matica srpska*). *Matica* can be translated as 'the centre of' or 'the parent body of a community in this context.

36 See <http://www.kdzp.sk> (accessed September 3, 2020).

37 E.g., Anton Čulen, author of a book about Kuffa the priest and founder of the Alliance for Sunday, had also previously successfully lobbied for the introduction of a conscience clause into law. See also note 16.

38 The conservative media *Postoj* and *.týždeň* also distanced themselves from Kuffa, see P. Stach and M. Bruneau, 'Známi slovenski katolíci reagujú na M. Kuffu: Nehovorí za nás, o nás ani k nám', *Denník N*, March 21, 2018, <https://dennikn.sk/1070635/znami-slovenski-katolici-reaguju-na-m-kuffu-stojime-za-pochodmi/?pref-tit1> (accessed June 30, 2021). Among others, Vladimír Palko, a key figure in KDH until 2008 when he left and who first supported Marián Kuffa, distanced himself from him at the end of 2018, citing Kuffa's spread of conspiracy

sively withdrew their support for the Kuffa brothers. While close to Záborská's party on anti-abortion and anti-LGBTI policies, the party has also started advocating pro-Russian positions and spreading conspiracy theories about the European Union. The anti-gender campaign thus became a new site of expression for another important divide in the Slovak political landscape – that between the nationalist and sovereigntist pro-Russian camp and a pro-Western one comprising both liberals and conservatives.

### **Using the Anti-gender Agenda to Redefine the Country's Relation to the West**

Slovakia's integration with the European Union and its political transformation opened two fronts of political conflict that had been relatively stalled during the transformation period. The dissolution of the liberal-conservative alliance led to a more explicit dissociation of culturally liberal and culturally conservative groups, and the 'return to Europe' made it, paradoxically, legitimate to newly question the country's place and role in Europe and its (geo)political horizon. As a result, a diversification of political views on what 'Europe' referred to ensued.

Miles away from a simplistic division between pro-European liberals and Eurosceptic conservatives, the Slovak anti-gender campaign reveals that the dividing line in perceptions concerning the country's place in Europe and attitudes towards EU integration run across Christian conservative politics. In this regard, the Slovak case illustrates the assertion made in the introduction to this volume about the culture wars in Central Europe not being reducible to a disillusionment in society about the success or failure of a 'return to Europe', an assertion that warns against placing 'too much weight on the inter-regional (or geopolitical) dynamic of the post-communist

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theories. The criticism stayed rather mild however and the more categoric rebuttals of Kuffa's political activities came only from protestant authors, e.g., from Daniel Pastirčák, 'Keby priváľal ten jazdec', *Týždeň*, April 30, 2018, <https://www.tyzden.sk/stlpceky/47940/keby-privaval-ten-jazdec/>, accessed September 7, 2020) and Samuel Jezný, 'Známi katolíci sa dištancovali od Kuffu. Zjavne to nestačilo', *SME* April 13, 2018, <https://koomentare.sme.sk/c/20797570/znami-katolici-sa-distancovali-od-kuffu-zjavne-to-nestacilo.html#ixzz63xkNTG0o> (accessed September 7, 2020).

transition, as if what was at stake was one part of the East joining the West or, alternatively, failing to do so.’

The two new political parties that rose as competitors to KDĤ, the Christian Union (KÚ) and KDŹP, advocated for broadly the same policies on abortions but differed precisely in their discourse about the European Union and the West. Whereas MEP Anna Záborská (KÚ) held a pro-European discourse and insisted on the need for Slovakia to play a constructive role in the EU, KDŹP praised Slavic Brotherhood, published positive appreciation for Putin’s and Trump’s politics and spread stories from disinformation servers that sketch an apocalyptic vision of a morally decadent West. Reviving the messianic vein of the Slovak political tradition, as well as what historian Miloslav Szabó calls the Slovak priests’ ‘temptation of radical politics’ (Szabó 2019), the priest Marián Kuffa went to lengths to depict himself as a martyr whose life was in danger, implying ‘Brussels’ and ‘liberals’ were undoubtedly on a mission to murder him for daring to say the truth.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, in the discourse of the Kuffa brothers, a ‘gender conspiracy’ (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017) appears as a novel articulation of an older element of Slovak politics – conspiracy theories about the West. Anti-Western propaganda has been linked to pan-Slavism since the nineteenth century and was spread by both the WWII Slovak state and the communist regime (Panczová 2017). Given that the Slovak population is a small and peripheral one, projects of political autonomy never really proposed a viable national community that would become a European power in itself and instead were associated with visions of belonging to a wider cultural space in which the Slovaks would play a role, the latter being more or less modestly formulated from that of the poor, who know what is right because they are not blinded by materialism (Kollár 1836/2009), to a role similar to that evoked by Polish conservatives, one of a resource of authentic faith that can bring Europe ‘back to its Christian roots’.

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39 See the numerous speeches of Marián Kuffa broadcast online (available on YouTube) and Valkovičová 2019 for a brief analysis.

However, the new variations on a discourse presenting the West as a source of dangerous inspiration also appear among perfectly secular, even anti-clerical political actors, such as the leader of the right-wing liberal party SaS:

As a term, liberalism is mistakenly used today in the West to speak about socialism and multiculturalism<sup>40</sup> [...] Political parties, including SaS, are funded by Slovak taxpayers. So, I will fight for the freedom of the Slovak and not for the freedom of Pedro of Portugal or Ahmed of Eritrea. I don't know who ever figured out that liberals now must agree to abolish borders, that everyone can go wherever they want – that is anarchy to me. And I consider Western-type liberalism to be a very harmful thing.<sup>41</sup>

Such a reinterpretation of liberalism as compatible with sovereigntist and nationalist politics reminds us of the not often underlined nuance in what 'the imaginary West' represented to the populations of Central Europeans. As Pavel Barša, Zora Hesová and Ondřej Slačálek write in the introduction to this volume, the framework of Western civilization was reappropriated not for being universal but for being Western – connoting living standards and consumerism for some and a region defined by its Christian identity and culture for others.

Apart from its civilizationist dimension, the recurrent criticism of liberalism in the anti-gender campaign also – simply – provided a new vocabulary to feelings of disenchantment with the 'last utopia of Central Europe', the 'imaginary West' (Barša 2017), both literally – the word 'gender' is now known in the most far away villages of Eastern Slovakia – and in a more general sense of a repertoire of themes available to express one's critical views on political issues. Whereas the entrepreneurs and supporters of the anti-gender campaign rarely use racism and xenophobia as resources for gathering

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40 'Multiculti' (*multikulti*) in the original Slovak version, used as a depreciative and ridiculing shortening of 'multiculturalism', connoting its alleged naivety.

41 Interview with Richard Sulík 'Obvinenie Fica je smiešne. Liberalizmus západného typu je veľmi škodlivý, hovorí Sulík', *Denník Slovensko*, December 9, 2019, <https://dennikslovensko.sk/13809/exkluzivne-obvinenie-fica-je-smiesne-liberalizmus-zapadneho-typu-je-velmi-skodlivy-hovori-sulik/> (accessed September 10, 2020).



support,<sup>42</sup> they do use the fractured confidence that ‘catching up’ with Western European countries will solve the country’s problems. In 2013, at a conference on ‘the ideology of gender equality’, the president of the Conference of Bishops presented the country’s membership in the European Union as a constraint in the quest for its own normative model:

Two factors influence the spread of gender equality ideology in our country. The first is secularization, which in its radical form seeks to push religion to the margins of social life. In Europe, this process has made it difficult to find any great value that would not be questioned. This relativization is the result of an increasingly widespread agnosticism. We are ourselves surprised to see how many people in our country do not believe in the possibility of knowing the truth, only in freedom. *The second factor is our membership in the European Union.* (author’s emphasis)

Connecting the IC issue to a wider conservative agenda is also common among senior politicians and prominent conservative politicians. When sharing his comments on Marián Kuffa’s marches against gender ideology, Ján Čarnogurský, a cofounder of the Christian Democratic Movement reprobed the ‘liberal journalists’ criticizing Kuffa and discarded their relevance with an epochal argument: ‘What these journalists omit to write is that the hegemony of liberal ideology is over, and that their articles now belong to the past decade.’<sup>43</sup> In an article for the conservative daily *Postoj*, another prominent figure of KDH, Vladimír Palko, who has also written about a ‘marginalization and a persecution of Christians in the West’,<sup>44</sup> in turn presented popular support for the anti-gender campaign as a rejection of ‘Western liberalism’:

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42 Reference to threats brought about by migration were indeed rare in the campaign, and Kuffa, the priest, while spreading a number of hoaxes and conspiracy theories about ‘Western liberalism’, the kidnapping of children from Christian parents and such, even pledged he would take care of migrants in need and accommodate them in his parish (see ‘Charizmatický farár Marián Kuffa sa pripravuje na utečencov’, *TV Noviny*, September 11, 2015, [https://www.tvnoviny.sk/domace/1804805\\_charizmaticky-farar-marian-kuffa-sa-pripravuje-na-utecencov](https://www.tvnoviny.sk/domace/1804805_charizmaticky-farar-marian-kuffa-sa-pripravuje-na-utecencov), accessed September 7, 2020).

43 <https://www.facebook.com/jan.carnogursky/posts/1615853591860950>, Facebook post from May 2, 2018.

44 Palko, V., *Levy prichádzajú*, 2012, 2019.

There are simply two great desires at work here. One is people's desire for a more decent, more honest policy than Fico's. The second is the desire to reject the penetration of Western liberalism towards us. And both are correct. A complicating factor is that the world of Čaputová [the country's President] is completely insensitive to the other desire and the world of Fico and SNS [a coalition partner of SMER] to the first. However, this does not mean that there should not be a policy that is sensitive to both natural desires and tries to fulfil them.<sup>45</sup>

A secularized version of this discourse is represented by the governing party's leader Róbert Fico, who together with his party's conservative shift also adopted the narrative of a 'culture war' between tradition and liberalism. When commenting on the parliament's March 2019 adoption of a resolution against IC ratification, Fico famously stated it was a 'slap in the face of liberalism'.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

In sum, the translation of the transnational anti-gender toolbox into Slovak politics participates in the European contestation of the rights-based ideal of liberal democracy and offers three main elements for answering the initial question of why morality issues have gained such political salience since approximately 2013 in Slovakia and why they have had an important impact on the Slovak political field.

First, the emergence of culture war politics in Slovakia is to be interpreted not as a backlash following a preceding period where liberalism dominated but rather as a consequence of the implosion of a liberal-conservative alliance that accomplished the political and economic transformation and integrated countries into the European Union and NATO. The Slovak case illustrates the importance of the liberal-conservative alliance with particular strength. At

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45 Palko, V., 'Prezident a Istanbul', *Postoj*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.postoj.sk/42173/prezident-a-istanbul> (accessed June 30, 2021).

46 'Istanbulský dohovor: Liberalizmus dostal po papuli, povedal Fico', *Pravda*, March 29, 2019, <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/507209-istanbulsky-dohovor-liberalizmus-dostal-po-papuli-hovori-fico> (accessed June 30, 2021).

the beginning of the 2000s, as Poland and Hungary were entering their 'second conservative revolutions' (Bozóki 2008) due to the start of crises in the post-1989 liberal-conservative alliances, Slovakia was living a second 'end of history', back on the track to Europe after the period that is nowadays referred to as Mečiarism and that was defeated precisely by a wide liberal-conservative alliance that governed the country until 2006. Narratives on identity and memory were mobilized to give a concrete, context-specific mobilizing potential to the 'culture wars' chosen as the priority of new conservative politics.

Secondly, the campaign achieved a change in the positions of the government on the IC due to the intense engagement of moral and policy entrepreneurs with access to resources for mass mobilization and political elites. In retrospect, the Alliance for Family, which organized the Marches for Life and then took part in the anti-gender campaign, appears to have functioned as an alternative platform for activism in Christian politics at a time when the traditional Christian KDH party was losing political capital, opening avenues for new or rebranded contestants. In other words, the campaigns on morality issues became a training and professionalization ground and a career accelerator for a diverse group of activists from Christian communities and pro-life organizations. It enabled the accumulation of political capital and then converted this into positions on electoral lists of more (KDH) or less (OLaNO) established parties. As a result, a number of these new leaders entered national politics, but the traditional Christian democratic party was no longer seen as a compulsory transit zone or as the ultimate destination.

Thirdly, morality politics has revealed and fostered key changes in the national political landscape after the dissolution of the liberal-conservative pro-European alliance. The relation to Western Europe and the United States has long since had structuring effects on politics and partisan competition. With roots reaching to the nineteenth century, this relation was key in the 1990s and, arguably, more salient than the right-left divide of the political spectrum. A desire to 'catch up with the West', to 'return to Europe' or to look for a different 'national' way of transformation played a key role in the elections of 1992 that brought later semi-autocrat Vladimír Mečiar to power, as

well as those in 1998 that brought him down, to the benefit of a wide coalition of centre-right parties defending a neoliberal programme of economic transformation. The anti-gender campaign provided ground for novel articulations of this cleavage.

Finally, it needs to be said that this chapter only provides an introductory mapping of the conditions and effects of the anti-gender campaign in Slovakia. It raises a number of questions that would necessitate a separate inquiry: Mapping the evolution of divisions in the Christian activist sphere in recent decades in connection with the evolution of partisan politics, including a longitudinal prosopographic analysis of the leaders of Christian NGOs and associations, would help establish, with more precision, what change the anti-gay marriage and anti-gender campaigns represent for Christian politics from a longitudinal perspective. This chapter does not look either at what drives the signatories of petitions and participants of marches to actively support the anti-gender campaign. In addition, the impact of the anti-gender campaign on the attitudes and opinions of the population could not be explored in this chapter; existing opinion surveys nevertheless suggest a decrease in support for same-sex marriage.

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