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Retrogressive Mobilization in the 2018 “Referendum for Family” in Romania

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ABSTRACT

We approach critically the assertion that a referendum ultimately defends the “traditional family,” by examining the articulation of anti-gender politics in Romanian parliamentary debates. We contribute theoretically by employing the concept of retrogressive mobilization in plebiscitary circumstances. We show that in Romania the contours of retrogressive mobilization transgress both the ideological left–right cleavage, and even party loyalty. We demonstrate how the ideological work done for the fantasmatic logics of retrogressive mobilization articulates two antithetical narrative scenarios, both centering on the Orthodox “nature” of the Romanian nation, whose existence and survival are said to hinge on the protection of the “traditional family” from “LGBT ideology.”

Introduction

In this article, we problematize the discursive construction asserting that a plebiscite is the ultimate solution to the defense of the “traditional family.” More specifically, we provide a critical analysis of the debates in the two chambers of the Romanian parliament on the necessity of a “referendum for family.” These debates took place between 2015 and 2018, thus spanning two parliamentary mandates (2012–2016; 2016–2020). The imperative to make constitutional changes to ensure the “sanctity of the institution of marriage,” which is narrowly understood as the exclusive union between a man and a woman, has been employed in Eastern Europe and elsewhere across the world by a particular form of conservative retrogressive mobilization against gender and sexual equality (Correa 2020, 12–14; Paternotte and Kuhar 2018, 7; Verloo 2018, 215–216). They share a “critique of gender, labeled as ‘gender ideology,’ ‘gender theory’ or ‘(anti)genderism’” (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018, 8), which forms the nucleus of their political agenda and manifests as specific anti-gender politics. These retrogressive mobilizations have a variable membership, contingent upon national political geographies and societal dynamics (Bouvard, De Proost, and Norocel 2019). This notwithstanding, they seem to reunite representatives from conservative and radical-right populist parties, ethno-nationalist organizations, and anti-choice civil society groups, with the active encouragement of various religious institutions, such as the Catholic Church, national Orthodox Churches, and various neo-Protestant churches (Bluhm et al. 2021; Edenborg 2017; Kováts and Pöim 2015; Paternotte and Kuhar 2017; Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2015; Stoeckl 2020). With this in mind, our research question is: What discursive scenarios are construed to justify the imperative of a “referendum for family”? We argue that anti-gender politics serves as a catalyst for retrogressive mobilization, and demonstrate that its

contours transgress both the consecrated ideological left–right cleavage (a particularity of the Romanian case), and even party loyalty (as members of the same party took opposing stances on the matter).

At present, the LGBT+ community enjoys some legal protections (freedom of expression, equal age of consent, anti-discrimination, and protection against hate crimes). However, same-sex relationships, adoptions by same-sex couples, and gender recognition and the bodily integrity of trans people are not legally recognized, placing Romania among the lowest-ranked countries in the European Union (EU) with regard to LGBT+ rights protection.¹

A brief historical overview is necessary. The mobilization around anti-gender politics in Romania has gained consistency and reunited various societal actors since the early 2000s. The repeal of the infamous Article 200 of the penal code by both chambers of Parliament in summer 2001 was a significant step forward for the rights of the LGBT+ community in Romania (O’Dwyer 2018, 196–199). However, the Romanian Orthodox Church (*Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, BOR) staunchly opposed it, warning Parliament against “voting laws that go against Christian morals, against the law of nature, and the dignity and vocation of the family.”² BOR recruited support among conservative and ethno-nationalist organizations, as well as radical-right populist parties with a parliamentary presence, in an attempt to stop the repeal (Cinpoș 2021, 424; Mărgărit 2019, 1572; Norocel 2015, 146). Five years later, the main non-governmental organization advocating for LGBT+ rights in Romania, ACCEPT, supported a legislative initiative for same-sex marriage rights. To counter it, BOR joined forces with a citizens’ committee and collected signatures in support of amending the Romanian constitution. The amendment stated explicitly that the legal definition of marriage specifies the

exclusive union between a man and a woman (Mărgărit 2019, 1576; O'Dwyer 2018, 205–207). In parallel with this, anti-choice mobilization became increasingly visible in Romania, and infiltrated the political agenda, connecting negative descriptions of abortion rights with the pursuit of “defending family values.”

In 2015, another citizens' committee initiated a legislative proposal to modify the Romanian Constitution, whereby references to “marriage between spouses” were to be replaced with the more explicit “marriage between a man and a woman.” The initiative thus aimed to preemptively block the possibility of legislating on same-sex marriage rights (Băluță and Tănăsescu 2018, 398–399). On the eve of the 2016 parliamentary elections, the umbrella organization pushing for the referendum, the Coalition for Family (*Coaliția pentru Familie*, CpF), successfully signed electoral protocols with three key political forces in Romanian politics. These were the nominally left-leaning Social Democratic Party (*Partidul Social Democrat*, PSD); the conservative-liberal National Liberal Party (*Partidul Național Liberal*, PNL), and the nominally social-liberal Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (*Alianța Liberalilor și Democraților*, ALDE) (Mărgărit 2020, 10). By way of these electoral protocols, the parties committed to pushing the legislation necessary for organizing a referendum on the matter through the chambers of Parliament, while the CpF campaigned in favor of these parties ahead of the elections. In the aftermath of those elections, Parliament voted to organize a plebiscite on the matter in 2017, but to little effect until the PSD leader, Liviu Dragnea, suddenly announced that it was to take place over two days in October 2018. The referendum was opposed internationally by Amnesty International and the advocacy group ILGA Europe. It was opposed at national level as well, albeit by only a handful of politicians, either independents or from the Save Romania Union (*Uniunea Salvați România*, USR), which was consistently against it. In addition to these, acting president Klaus Iohannis also argued against “religious fanaticism and ultimatums.”³ CpF mobilized its followers to participate in the plebiscite and vote in favor of the constitutional modification. The group's efforts were openly supported by various churches, such as BOR, the national branches of the Catholic Church, and several neo-Protestant churches. They were also supported by some political parties, most notably the governing PSD, which likened a positive vote in the referendum to a vote of confidence in its cabinet. At the last minute, the PNL, among other parties, instructed its followers to vote as they saw fit. The opponents of the referendum, in turn, encouraged their supporters to simply boycott it.

Although the voting stations were open for two consecutive days (October 6–7), the turnout was just over 21 percent, thus below the 30 percent threshold. This low turnout seems to be in part a consequence of the PSD politicizing the referendum, thereby changing the issue at stake, and undermining its support in the public sphere (Mărgărit 2020; Soare and Tufiş 2021). Notwithstanding this, among those who cast their ballot, 91.6 percent were in favor of the constitutional amendment. This figure was later used by the CpF to maintain the mobilization for another, similar plebiscite in the future. As a consequence of the low turnout, the referendum was

invalidated, while a civil partnership legislative proposal was quickly tabled for parliamentary debate. Debated intensely, this proposal was met with a very negative response and is presently stuck in the process. The CpF accused mainstream parties of sabotage, and in 2019 several of its cadres founded the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (*Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor*, AUR).

This article contributes both empirically and theoretically to the field. Empirically, by examining the Romanian context, it provides nuance to similar analyses in other Eastern European contexts, such as Croatia (Vučković Juroš, Dobrotić, and Flego 2020; Sloopmaeckers and Sircar 2018), Czechia and Slovakia (Guasti and Bustikova 2020), Slovakia (Mos 2020), and Slovenia (Kuhar 2017). Focusing on the parliamentary debates on the topic that took place in both chambers between 2015 and 2018, it also makes an empirical contribution to the handful of scholarly analyses of the 2018 referendum in Romania, which examined either the various factors behind the failure to mobilize voters (Gherghina et al. 2019; Stănescu 2020), the adaptive strategies and tactics of LGBT+ organizations and the oppositional retrogressive mobilization engaged in the plebiscite (Mărgărit 2019), or the relationship between religion and party politics (Soare and Tufiş 2021). Theoretically, by employing the concept of retrogressive mobilization (Bouvar, De Proost, and Norocel 2019) in plebiscitary circumstances, it contributes to scholarship on anti-gender politics (Kováts and Pöim 2015; Panternotte and Kuhar 2017; Verloo 2018). The concept enables us to show how Members of Parliament (MPs) from across the political spectrum in Romania, both from the conservative-liberal PNL and other right-leaning parties, as well as from the nominally left-leaning PSD and even independent MPs, provided discursive consistency to a promised beatific narrative scenario, in which the Orthodox Romanian heteronormative family would be confirmed in its hegemonic position in Romanian society, once the referendum had been successful. The discursive alternative was a doomsday narrative scenario, in which marriage equality was an omen of the imminent dissolution of Romanian society.

The article is organized into five further sections. The conceptual terrain of anti-gender politics is first mapped out, evidencing its catalyzing role in retrogressive mobilization. Then, the discourse analytical approach employed in the analysis of the Romanian parliamentary debates and the criteria for selecting the empirical material are discussed. Afterward, the critical analysis is organized into two sections, one presenting the fullness-to-come scenario, and the other presenting the concurrent doomsday scenario. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings, which are situated within the wider context of research in the field.

Anti-Gender Politics as Catalysts for Retrogressive Mobilization

Our theoretical understanding of anti-gender politics is closely related to previous conceptualizations of “opposition to gender + equality” (Verloo 2018), whereby “a perspective opposing feminist politics and gender+ equality policy is articulated in a way that can be expected to influence or is actually influencing politics or policymaking at any stage” (Verloo 2018, 6). As

such, anti-gender politics appear to be driven by the imperative to mobilize against “gender ideology,” which serves as a kind of “symbolic glue” (Kováts and Pöim 2015) for a variety of retrogressive aims, such as opposition to same-sex marriage rights, opposing reproductive rights for women, and hostility toward sex education and gender studies and their alleged totalitarian ambitions. They do not fit neatly into one particular endeavor, although “conservative politics” is an oft-quoted umbrella concept.

The conservatism to which the phrase “conservative politics” makes reference, however, is a militant yet indiscriminate juxtaposition of separate and even contradictory tenets of conservative ideology, including autocratic and illiberal tendencies, deregulation and privatization dogmas, encroachment on civil society and academic freedom, and a fixation with protecting national identities from the alleged “corrosive influence” of the European Union (EU) (Bluhm et al. 2021, 5; Bouvart, De Proost, and Norocel 2019, 7; Korolczuk and Graff 2018, 798–799; Kriszán and Roggeband 2018, 92; Mărgărit 2020, 2–3; Paternotte and Kuhar 2018, 9–10). The concept remains heavily contingent on the way in which it is selectively remembered and interpreted in each polity. This notwithstanding, researchers have pointed out that anti-gender politics are not some localized trend; rather, they need to be understood in a wider transnational context (Correa 2020, 13; Paternotte and Kuhar 2017, 4). In this regard, our critical examination aims to bring empirical nuances to previous analyses of anti-gender politics in other Eastern European contexts, which examined similar referenda against same-sex marriage rights (see, Kuhar 2017; Mos 2020; Sloopmaeckers and Sircar 2018; Vučković Juroš, Dobrotić, and Flego 2020).

To account for the various vehicles for anti-gender politics, we employ the concept of “retrogressive mobilization” (Bouvart, De Proost, and Norocel 2019, 5), which synthesizes the complicated assemblage of both mainstream conservative and radical right populist political parties, national as well as transnational religious institutions, civil society organizations militating against women’s reproductive rights, and groups on the extreme right preoccupied with preserving the ethnic and racial purity of the native ethnic majority in the chosen polity (Bluhm et al. 2021; Edenborg 2017; Paternotte and Kuhar 2017; Stoeckl 2020). Our analysis is nonetheless more narrowly interested in the political geography of this retrogressive mobilization within the Romanian Parliament, thus concentrating on the manner in which MPs from various political parties discursively constructed two narrative scenarios, which were structured around ideals of and hindrances to the “referendum for family.”

With this narrower focus in mind, previous research has indicated that anti-gender politics is pursued by mainstream conservative parties seeking to reach beyond their constituencies, whereby the defense of “traditional values” from the advances of “gender ideology” serves as an expedient strategy to reaffirm religion in the public sphere (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017, 3). Concomitantly, anti-gender politics is embraced by radical right populist parties. In this case, skepticism about furthering the European integration project, which in the Eastern European context is presented as yet another colonizing attempt, juxtaposes demographic anxieties and fears of

ethnic and racial miscegenation, which center on the combined impact of internal threats (be they ethnic minorities, or LGBT+ communities) and external dangers (embodied by the Muslim migrant). The result is a compulsive fixation on the child as both the tangible proof of reproduction within the framework of the traditional family, and the symbolic embodiment of the nation’s future (Cinpoș and Norocel 2020, 62–63; Mayer and Sauer 2017, 27–28; Paternotte and Kuhar 2018, 12; Vučković Juroš, Dobrotić, and Flego 2020, 1529).

In Romania, radical right populist parties display the qualities of “phoenix populism” (Soare and Tufiş 2019), whereby the ideology of the radical right is periodically repackaged and partially renewed via new political parties, a consequence of the cannibalistic nature of both the PSD and the PNL, “which abound in nationalist and traditionalist messages, regardless of their purported political identity” (Mărgărit 2020, 8). The imperative of safeguarding Romanians’ ethnic homogeneity and primacy in the country is nonetheless continuously articulated in opposition to the cultural transformations brought about by the EU accession process. In a sense, this confirms the thesis of a linkage between the EU and LGBT+ rights (Ayoub and Paternotte 2014; O’Dwyer 2018). Tellingly, the dominant radical right party of the early 2000s, the Greater Romania Party (*Partidul România Mare*, PRM), swiftly dismissed those supporting the repeal of Article 200 as “horsemen of the Apocalypse” assaulting “the Family and the Christian Church” (Norocel 2015, 151). A more recent populist iteration, the People’s Party–Dan Diaconescu (*Partidul Poporului–Dan Diaconescu*, PP-DD), succeeded in gaining parliamentary representation in 2012 by mixing extreme right and populist welfare chauvinistic appeals (Gherghina and Mişcoiu 2014, 193), only to be cannibalized by the governing parties during the analyzed period (Soare and Tufiş 2021, 2). Upon a preliminary inspection of the collected empirical material, which straddles two legislative mandates (2012–2016; 2016–2020), we noted that MPs who were either still formally representing the PP-DD, or about to become independents or to join one of the parties in government, were particularly active in the analyzed debates. This falls into line with previous observations that there is a constant migration of politicians from radical right populist parties toward more mainstream political parties, which in turn evolve toward a nationalist core (Mărgărit 2020, 8).

Although radical right populist parties are in constant flux in Romanian parliamentary politics, anti-gender politics seems to have found favorable conditions among the mainstream parties. On this matter, previous research has convincingly shown that most parties active in the post-communist context hurriedly discarded the “communist legacy” and its veneer of gender equality (Băluță 2015, 174–176), and consolidated a masculine political arena. In this context, neoliberal economic dogma was unequivocally proclaimed as the only way to “return to Europe” (Cinpoș and Norocel 2020, 52). This was coupled with the conservative assumption that, whenever they entered politics, women should be concerned with “soft” policy issues, reifying traditional gender roles underpinned by biological differentiation and heteronormative family ideals (Băluță 2013, 120–123, 2020, 19; Chiva 2017, 158–159; Miroiu 2010, 580–589; Norocel 2018, 44). This served as fertile

ground for more recent retrogressive manifestations, which have consolidated the by now widely circulating traditionalist views on women, the family, and politics. These have been repackaged with the help of a new vocabulary inspired by anti-gender campaigns from across the world (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017; Correa 2020), such as references to “gender ideology” (*ideologie de gen*), which at times is employed conterminously with “LGBT ideology” (*ideologie LGBT*). Specific to the Romanian case, this vocabulary incorporates accusations of “sex-Marxism” (*sexo-marxism*) (Băluță 2020, 25; Mărgărit 2020, 8), which insinuates a dangerous linkage between sexual and reproductive rights, perceived overwhelmingly negatively from a traditionalist perspective, and Marxism, exploiting the latter’s negative connotations in the post-communist context. Consequently, we have bypassed consecrated ideological distinctions so as to sketch the discursive contours of anti-gender politics within the Romanian Parliament. We collected and critically examined the parliamentary interventions of MPs from both the opposition—parties like the conservative-liberal PNL, the purportedly Christian-democratic People’s Movement Party (*Partidul Mișcarea Populară*, PMP), and the populist radical right PP-DD; and the governmental coalition—the nominally social-democratic PSD (since the referendum was organized at the behest of its leader), as well the various independent MPs, or those who changed their political allegiance during the analyzed period.

A Discourse Analytical Approach to Romanian Parliamentary Debate

This study entailed the qualitative analysis of parliamentary documents by means of an amended version of Political Discourse Theory (Glynos and Howarth 2007; Laclau 2000), which we mobilized for the purposes of critical political analysis. The central methodological category at work here is that of “logic” (Clarke 2012; Glynos and Howarth 2007; Glynos, Klimecki, and Willmott 2015). “Logic” is understood as the specific set of relations between different entities and their inherent qualities in a specific socio-political context that makes possible their discursive functioning within that context (Laclau 2000, 283–284). In turn, this logic of critical explanation operationalizes three distinctive interpretive registers: social logics, political logics, and fantasmatic logics that “articulate something about the norms, roles and narratives, as well as the ontological presuppositions that, together, render practices possible, intelligible and vulnerable to contestation” (Glynos, Klimecki, and Willmott 2015, 395).

Among these interpretive registers, the social logics “help us characterize a practice in terms of its dominant, sedimented norms” (Glynos, Klimecki, and Willmott 2015, 395), although “it is important to bear in mind that such ‘rules’ are heuristic tools, enabling us to make sense of a practice, rather than existing externally to and controlling—or for that matter, being merely reducible to—social practices” (Clarke 2012, 178). In our case, the social logic of heteronormative family life, which is hegemonic in Romanian society (Băluță 2013, 2015; Miroiu 2010; Norocel 2015, 2016) and across much of Eastern Europe, is characterized by a specific gender regime, whereby “state-building, nationalism and democracy-building

have been closely intertwined during the consolidation of a fraternal, masculine public political sphere” (Chiva 2005, 81) in the post-communist context. The “rules” of this social reality privilege the nuclear organization of family life, entailing a father, a mother, and their offspring, which is underpinned by women’s subordinate role to the masculine head of the family; the “traditional (Romanian) family” is thus discursively constructed as the norm (Băluță 2013, 2015; Miroiu 2010).

In turn, the political logics “function as organizationally grounded rhetorical tropes that seek to draw equivalences [...] between elements, groups or individuals, in order to establish, defend or contest an existing norm, or to pre-empt the contestation of a norm” (Glynos, Klimecki, and Willmott 2015, 395). Such a chain of equivalences entails reducing the social space to two antagonistic camps, which subdues any other existing variances within these camps. In our case, the “traditional (Romanian) family” is underpinned by nationalist and religious conceptions emphasizing the differentialist dyad of masculine versus feminine within the family. This entails celebrating maternity as the biological, social, and symbolic destiny of women, thus constituting “natural” heteronormative families, understood to be Romanian and Christian (Orthodox), in opposition to same-sex families (Băluță 2013; Chiva 2005; Norocel 2013). Concomitantly, this vision also silences instances of transgenerational families reuniting grandmothers, single mothers, and their offspring, or families transgressing ethnic boundaries and religious divisions. This notwithstanding, such a simplification and imposition of a hegemonic fixation of meaning is unstable and contingent, and “can only achieve its hegemonic status by concealing its incompleteness and partiality” (Clarke 2012, 178).

Finally, the fantasmatic logics are “structured around ideals and obstacles that offer inter alia reassurance and hope in relation to widely felt anxieties, thereby facilitating the resumption or transformation of familiar patterns of activity” (Glynos, Klimecki, and Willmott 2015, 395). These logics need not be understood as illusory; rather, they do ideological work to contour a harmonious and seamlessly functioning whole, emphasizing the social logic despite the contingent, shattered, and incomplete nature of social reality. In so doing, they aim to pacify political opposition and preclude the coalescence of resistance (Clarke 2012, 179; Glynos and Howarth 2007, 145–146). This ideological work is achieved through the construction of two narrative scenarios. The beatific one entails “a fullness-to-come once a named [...] obstacle is overcome” (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 147), and “offers promise of social salvation in the form of complete social harmony” (Clarke 2012, 179). The horrific one entails a doomsday scenario of “impotence and victimhood” (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 147), and “presents threat in form of specters of inexorable societal decline” (Clarke 2012, 179). Returning to the subject matter at hand, these fantasmatic logics have allowed us to distinguish in the analyzed parliamentary documents the contours of the promised fullness-to-come narrative scenario that the retrogressive mobilization envisaged once the obstacle of organizing the referendum and eventually amending the constitution had been overcome. Concomitantly, we identified the outlines of

Table 1. Breakdown of Keywords by Fantasmatic Scenario, in both Romanian Original (in *Italics*) and Their English Translation (within Parentheses)

Fantasmatic scenarios	Keywords
Fullness-to-come scenario	<i>referendum pentru familie</i> (referendum for family) <i>familie tradițională</i> (traditional family) <i>familie naturală</i> (natural family) <i>căsătorie</i> (marriage) <i>valori creștine</i> (Christian values)/ <i>ortodox</i> (Orthodox)
Doomsday scenario	<i>ideologie LGBT</i> (LGBT ideology) <i>ideologie de gen</i> (gender ideology) <i>sexo-marxism</i> (sexo-Marxism) <i>parteneriat civil</i> (civil partnership) <i>homosexual/gay/LGBT</i> (homosexual/gay/LGBT)

the doomsday narrative scenario that these forces indicated as being the direct consequence of not succeeding in their plebiscitary effort.

With this in mind, we concentrated on the discursive articulation of the two fantasmatic logics (the promised fullness-to-be and the feared doomsday scenario), which in turn provided insights into the wider social and political logics pursued by the parliamentary retrogressive mobilization. For this purpose, we selected the period from November 2015 (when the parliamentary debate picked up on the topic, as the CpF initiated the citizen-led procedure for revising the Romanian constitution) until December 2018 (two months into the aftermath of the failed referendum, when the civil partnership legislative proposal was debated and eventually rejected in the Senate, and is yet to be debated in the Chamber of Deputies). During the first stage, centralized from both the Chamber of Deputies⁴ and the Senate,⁵ we collected⁶ a total of 800 empirical items, representing the interventions of various MPs in the two chambers on various topics during the chosen timeframe. During the second stage, derived from the study's theoretical framework, we further refined the search by means of several keywords specific to each fantasmatic scenario, as described in Table 1 above.

We retrieved a total of 144 items, of which 99 contained the phrase “civil partnership,” 45 contained the keywords relating to the referendum, and, overlapping these, 5 contained “LGBT (ideology)” and 2 contained “gender(s) (ideology).” Upon closer inspection, these items were authored by 44 MPs (the keywords “civil partnership”), and 28 MPs (the keyword “referendum”); of these, 23 MPs had authored more than one item, intervening both in their own name and as representing the parliamentary group to which they belonged. Since the selected timeframe spans two parliamentary mandates (2012–2016; 2016–2020), we noted the political affiliation of the MPs at the moment of their intervention, and crosschecked it for the mandate's duration. In terms of frequency, the most interventions were made by MPs from the opposition PNL (Andrei Daniel Gheorghe—12 interventions), and governing PSD (Ioan Chelaru—6 interventions; Georgeta Carmen Holban—5; Costel Lupașcu—4; Titus Corlățean—3). It is noteworthy that many of these MPs were either members of or attendees at the events of the Ecumenical Prayer Group (*Grupul Ecumenic de Rugăciune*),⁷ an elusive parliamentary structure affiliated to several conservative organizations.

The Promised Fullness-to-Come of the Traditional Romanian Family

In general terms, the retrogressive mobilization in the Romanian Parliament constructed a fullness-to-come narrative scenario that centered on constant reminders about the (Christian) Orthodox “nature” of the Romanian nation, whose very existence and future survival hinged upon the “traditional family.” This is narrowly defined as the legally and religiously sanctioned union between a man and a woman for the purpose of breeding and rearing (Christian) Orthodox Romanian offspring. This discursive construction was enforced across time as well as across party lines by MPs from both the governing PSD (such as Birchall September 27, 2016; Căruțeru September 19, 2018; Ciofu September 5, 2018; Găină October 3, 2018; Holban October 3, 2018; Iane December 3, 2015; Mocanu May 20, 2015; Zamfira October 10, 2018) and the opposition PNL (Ardelean October 24, 2016; Dincă October 24, 2016; Gheorghe March 14, 2017; October 10, 2018). Among those contributing to it, there were both MPs still active in the PP–DD (Iovescu March 31, 2015), and those who, during the mandate, either joined one of the parties in government (Marin March 31, 2015; Mihai March 17, 2016) or became independent (Pușcaș May 12, 2015).

Upon closer inspection, the imperative to organize the “referendum for family” contoured a fullness-to-come that was articulated around two key issues that both rejected same-sex marriage rights. First, by insisting that the plebiscite enjoyed the support of “[Christian] Orthodox, Protestants, Catholics, neo-Protestants, and representatives of other religious denominations” (Gheorghe September 5, 2017), it revalorized the Christian religion (and confirmed the primacy of Orthodoxy) in the public sphere on account of the “Christian roots of the Romanian nation” (Birchall September 27, 2016), and because there are “eighteen religious denominations that represent 98 percent of the Romanian population” (Ardelean October 24, 2016). Second, by identifying the referendum as the panacea for reversing the accelerating demographic decline, it willfully ignored the actual socio-economic causes of this decline and the failures of politicians to substantially address any of these (Băluță 2013; Chiva 2005; Miroiu 2010; Norocel 2013). Instead, it claimed that such a narrow definition of “the family as based on freely consenting marriage between a man and a woman” would secure a growing “birth rate and the education of children in a modern, balanced family, oriented toward the traditional values of the Romanian people” (Ciofu May 9, 2018).

In 2018, the person with the most interventions on the matter, Andrei Daniel Gheorghe of the conservative-liberal PNL, delivered one of the most compelling examples of how the triad of religion (unmistakably Orthodox), nationhood (ethnically Romanian), and family (staunchly heteronormative) was discursively construed as solidly amalgamated into one homogenous national identity, upon the occasion of celebrating Romania's centenary as a united polity since the end of World War I in 1918:

This notwithstanding, there are also good things that are happening, and we will have two of them this year. I am referring to the noteworthy achievement of the Romanian Orthodox Church, on

the centennial anniversary: the National Cathedral, a historical achievement that Romanians have been waiting for since 1877, since the War of Independence. And, finally, an achievement of the civil society of Romania, the referendum for the family, the referendum that defends the natural family and the laws of nature in Romanian society. As such, our Christian values and our identity values are the only things that, in this difficult year of the Centenary, honor us, allow us to raise our heads high and remember with pride and dignity the fact that we are Romanians, and we must be united in a strong Romania. (Gheorghe September 19, 2018)

In our view, Gheorghe was discursively integrating the necessity of the referendum into a wider historical context, with the intention of contributing to Romanians' feelings of "pride and dignity" in celebrating the centenary of their unification, of being "united in a strong Romania." As such, he positioned the supposedly successful referendum that "defends the natural family and the laws of nature," as complementary to BOR's project of erecting the "National Cathedral."⁸ He labeled the latter a "historical achievement" that had been awaited by Romanians ever since their polity gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1877. In his intervention, religious affiliation (Christian Orthodox) is presented as a shorthand for ethnic belonging (Romanian), becoming "a key ingredient in coalescing solidarity for the ethno-nationalist project" (Norocel 2015, 146) commemorated during that year. Furthermore, the "natural family"—natural in the sense of being heteronormative, as it is implicitly acknowledged to be a social construct (Băluță 2015, 181)—is regarded as equally significant for the occasion. Such a "natural family and the laws of nature" are deemed to provide social coherence and unity, and to hold the promise of a future proliferation of the Romanian ethno-nationalist project.

Gheorghe's argument was later confirmed by Constantin-Cătălin Zamfira of the governing PSD, who proclaimed his belief in "a great Romanian family, in which, while all different, we can live together for the common good. It's time to rediscover traditional values and see those around us, regardless of their opinions, as part of a large Romanian family" (Zamfira October 10, 2018). Considering these statements, it seems that classical ideological differences between (a supposedly progressive and solidaristic) left and (a conservative) right were effaced for the purpose of safeguarding the "great Romanian family," underpinned by "traditional values" (Băluță 2020, 20; Soare and Tufiş 2021, 10–11) and yet tolerant enough to incorporate even those "around us, regardless of their [dissenting] opinions" as long as they willingly partook in the "large Romanian family," as Zamfira put it.

Despite these rallying arguments made in Parliament in favor of the referendum, the campaign on the ground failed to mobilize supporters. This was due to a combination of the boycott campaign, which resulted in a lack of real debate in the public sphere, voters' mistrust of the PSD's politicization of the issue, and the poor information explaining the convoluted wording on the ballot (Gherghina et al. 2019, 206–208; Stănescu 2020, 102–106). When the plebiscite failed, a renewed effort to pass a law concerning civil partnership was initiated by a former USR MP (Bizgan-Gayral), and this was met positively by some PSD MPs. BOR and the CpF reacted unequivocally against

it, labeling civil partnership a "surrogacy to marriage."⁹ The retrogressive reaction in Parliament materialized quickly, and the legislative initiative was dismissed as a gratuitous distraction by MPs from both the PSD (Căciulă October 31, 2018; Corlăţean October 29, 2018; Zamfira October 10, 2018) and the PNL (Gheorghe October 10, 2018). For instance, Titus Corlăţean—although also from the PSD—characterized the renewed efforts as unnecessary. This echoed his previous reaction, when he had dismissed projects to legislate for civil partnership in order to align the Romanian legislation with the EU legal framework, since "each Member State is legislating according to individual national circumstances" (Corlăţean March 31, 2015). His argument was that "family and private life are guaranteed in the broad, comprehensive formulas of Art. 26 of the 1991 Constitution, which is still valid today" (Corlăţean October 29, 2018). LGBT+ families were consequently refused the same level of legal protection as heterosexual couples by means of a reference to a vague constitutional formulation, although it was exactly this legal ambiguity that represented a source of constant uncertainty for both LGBT+ families and other cohabiting couples not legally acknowledged as spouses. In our view, this underlines yet again that, on family matters, the Romanian Parliament—understood to represent the will of the nation—has a legislative monopoly, even when going against or being unresponsive to the wider EU legal developments concerning LGBT+ rights (Ayoub and Paternotte 2014; O'Dwyer 2018).

The Perspective of Marriage Equality as a Doomsday Scenario

The retrogressive mobilization in the Romanian Parliament was constructed alongside an antithetical, doomsday narrative scenario that perceived the demand for same-sex marriage rights as evidence of an ideologically driven and forceful propaganda campaign to impose a foreign and even immoral legal framework. It was thus seen as embodying an omen of the imminent weakening of the family as a social and political institution, and consequently impending national dissolution at the instigation of a nefarious "homosexual lobby." This discursive construction was enforced across party lines by MPs from the PSD (Bodog October 3, 2018; Căciulă October 31, 2018; Iane December 3, 2015; Itu September 19, 2017; Lupaşcu September 12, 2018), the PNL (Gheorghe March 14, 2017; September 5, 2017; September 19, 2018), and the PP-DD (Iovescu March 31, 2015).

Yet again, Gheorghe contributed with several interventions, which provided discursive consistency to this scenario. The opposition to the referendum was dismissed outright as being "a new manipulation of LGBT propaganda, because the LGBT ideology, which promotes same-sex marriage and aims to eliminate Christian values from societies worldwide, is on a strong offensive in Romania" (Gheorghe March 14, 2017). In his view, the aim of "LGBT ideology" was to "promote" same-sex marriage and concurrently to "eliminate Christian values" from the targeted society. He thus aligned the two in an

antithetical position whereby the latter was propped up by moral arguments with Biblical foundations—a strategy common across Eastern Europe (Vučković Juroš, Dobrotić, and Flego 2020, 1541)—as in the following excerpt:

[All] these attacks against the Church, against the parliamentarians who voted for and support this referendum, and against the civil society organizations that support the referendum for the family—prove to us that this referendum is imperative. This referendum is also a milestone concerning the direction in which Romanian society is heading: either toward political correctness, [...] toward the destruction of Christian values and its national identity, or toward maintaining the same model of development of society that we have known for millennia and which respects freedom, respects human dignity, and respects normalcy—because here we are talking about normalcy, here we are talking about things concerning the laws of nature—and no one is allowed, on the basis of any ideology or commandments whatsoever, to distort the natural order. Any distortion of the natural order, in any society, is a fact against nature, an amoral and abusive fact that leads to crimes and horrors, the same direction as the two great totalitarianisms, Nazism and Communism, have led. (Gheorghe September 5, 2017)

We interpret Gheorghe's intervention as evidence of how the workings of the fantasmatic logic in this narrative scenario rest on denying the opponents of the "family referendum" the ability to participate in democratic deliberations, since they were portrayed as lacking respect for "freedom," "human dignity," and even for "normalcy." These were the privileged attributes of the defenders of "Christian values and its national identity," while the LGBT "propagand[ists]" were accused of forcing a "distortion of the natural order," which in Gheorghe's view was "an amoral and abusive fact" that opens the door to totalitarian interpretations, to "crimes and horrors." Such a stance, which equates "LGBT ideology" to the "great totalitarianisms, Nazism and Communism," echoes the discursive analogies of "'gender theory' as 'Marxism 2.0'" operated by the anti-gender retrogressive mobilization in Slovenia (Kuhar 2017, 221–222). Of particular interest to Gheorghe, however, was the Marxist affiliation, in a manner similar to the way in which, in Poland, it was identified as "a leftover from Communism" (Korolczuk and Graff 2018, 812). Following this line of reasoning, Gheorghe accused his opponents of attempting to reinterpret the Marxist theory of class struggle, by replacing the proletariat with "sexual minorities," and re-deploying it to impose an ideology that "denies Christian values, that denies fundamental freedom and denies human dignity, an ideology where the family no longer finds its place" (Gheorghe September 5, 2017). We argue that the doomsday scenario contoured in these interventions (Gheorghe March 14, 2017; September 5, 2017; September 19, 2018) rests on the fundamental rejection of the successive efforts to legislate for same-sex marriage rights on the grounds of harboring totalitarian aspirations. It also demands the outright exclusion from the Romanian nation of the entire LGBT+ community for fear that it will dislodge the triad of (Christian) Orthodox religion, Romanian ethnicity, and the traditional family, which provides coherence to the Romanian ethno-national project, as discussed in the previous section.

The sense of impending apocalypse gained ever sharper contours when the plebiscite failed. The PSD was left weakened when its attempt to politicize the referendum misfired, and also divided since some of its MPs advocated for the plebiscite while others opposed it. In its aftermath, the legislative initiative

concerning civil partnership, which was met positively by some PSD MPs, was swiftly opposed by others of the same party. One of these opponents (Căciulă) deemed this initiative to be proof of how the "homosexual lobby" was pressuring Romanian MPs; even more so, it was deemed to be only a first step toward a comprehensive set of LGBT+ rights, including "marriage, the adoption of children, and medically assisted procreation techniques." He dismissed the legislative effort as the product of "an extremist anti-family (aggravating discrimination against children) and anti-religious ideology (I refer specifically to the ideology shared by the authors of the proposal)" (Căciulă October 31, 2018). In our view, this reinforces the previous allegation against the elusive "homosexual lobby" (Korolczuk and Graff 2018, 808) of being driven by an extremist ideology. To this, another explanatory layer was added, labeling same-sex marriage rights as "an anti-family [...] ideology," which posed a danger to children (and the promised future they discursively embodied) (Căciulă October 31, 2018). It reflects a pattern of anti-gender mobilization across Eastern Europe (Guasti and Bustikova 2020; Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Kuhar 2017; Mos 2020), which claims to "defend the right of a child to have a father and a mother, the respect for male and female identities and the parents' freedom to raise their children as they wish" (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017, 1–2).

Căciulă subsequently warned that the strategy of "the ideologues of 'gay families'" is to initially alter the very vocabulary used to describe the institution of the family (such as replacing the gendered dyads "mother/father" and "wife/husband" with the neutral "parent 1/parent 2" and "partner 1/partner 2"), and then to "marginalize [those] opposing the idea that reality is an artificial construct, [...] and can be changed ideologically by changing the language of the law" (Căciulă October 31, 2018). This echoes similar arguments across the region, which claimed to unveil the hidden neocolonial agenda of "radical feminists" and "homosexual activists," whereby "men are no longer masculine and women are no longer feminine and one is free to choose one's own gender and sexual orientation, even 'several times a day'" (Kuhar 2017, 222). To sketch a preliminary conclusion, we identify strong similarities across Eastern Europe with how the retrogressive mobilization dismissed the push for same-sex marriage rights as ideologically motivated, as in Slovenia (Kuhar 2017, 216), or Croatia (Vučković Juroš, Dobrotić, and Flego 2020, 1538).

Concluding Remarks

In this article, we have examined the discursive underpinnings of the claim that a plebiscite is the ultimate solution for the defense of the "traditional family" in Romania. We have done so by analyzing the articulation of anti-gender politics in the parliamentary debates over a period of three years. To account for the different political vehicles against gender and sexual equality (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017, 2018; Verloo 2018), we employed the concept of retrogressive mobilization (Bouvar, De Proost, and Norocel 2019). This allowed us to identify the key actors in the Romanian context, a context that transgressed both consecrated ideological cleavages between (a supposedly progressive and solidaristic) left and (a conservative-liberal) right, and party loyalty (because MPs from the same party, as in the case of the

PSD, could take completely opposite positions). Indeed, the most fervent promoters of anti-gender politics included MPs from the liberal-conservative PNL, several MPs from the nominally social-democratic PSD, and a number of MPs who had previously represented the now-defunct radical right populist PP-DD. At the same time, in the aftermath of the failed referendum, different MPs from the PSD reacted positively to the renewed effort to enact a civil partnership law. On this matter, our study confirms previous research findings that both the PNL and PSD are supportive of the ethno-nationalist project (Chiva 2005; Mărgărit 2020; Norocel 2013; Soare and Tufiş 2021), and of heteronormative life as hegemonic social logic (Băluță 2013, 2015, 2020; Miroiu 2010; Norocel 2015, 2016).

For this critical political analysis, we mobilized an amended version of Political Discourse Theory, which allowed us to flesh out the different interpretive registers of discursive logics (Clarke 2012; Glynos and Howarth 2007; Glynos, Klimecki, and Willmott 2015; Laclau 2000). We distinguished how the ideological work done by the fantasmatic logics of retrogressive mobilization articulated two narrative scenarios. One promised a fullness-to-come, which naturalized the triad of (Christian) Orthodox religion, Romanian ethnicity, and the heteronormative family as constitutive of Romanian national identity. The other decried a looming doomsday, dismissing demands for equal marriage rights as an amoral ideology concealing totalitarian ambitions, and embodying an existential threat to the religion–nation–family triad that provides coherence to the Romanian ethno-religious national project. In this manner, we have added more empirical richness to analyses of encroachments upon equal marriage rights in other Eastern European contexts (Guasti and Bustikova 2020; Kuhar 2017; Mos 2020; Slootmaeckers and Sircar 2018; Vučković Juroš, Dobrotić, and Flego 2020). At the same time, we have added nuance to previous analyses of the 2018 referendum in Romania (Gherghina et al. 2019; Mărgărit 2019; Soare and Tufiş 2021; Stănescu 2020), providing an analysis of how anti-gender politics were articulated in the debates in the Romanian Parliament.

Another relevant conclusion is that organizations such as the CpF do not shy away from influencing the political agenda. They attempted to do so, as mentioned above, by making use of their support among Romanians to tilt the electoral balance in favor of those parties which seem willing to embrace the CpF's specific understanding of the "conservative political agenda" (Bouvar, De Proost, and Norocel 2019, 7). When the referendum failed and its legislative initiative was discarded, the CpF vehemently criticized its former political allies, and in December 2019 several of its key representatives founded yet another radical-right populist party, namely the AUR, which has become a significant political force in the Romanian Parliament since the 2020 elections. Unsurprisingly, the AUR passed the threshold for parliamentary representation by means of a self-confessed nationalist-conservative political program. This rests on traditional heteronormative family ideals, a kin-state approach toward Romanians in neighboring countries that emphasizes the pivotal role of (Christian) Orthodox faith, and independence from a European federal superstate.¹⁰ In other words, the Romanian context illustrates both the variable political geometry of retrogressive

mobilization (including even MPs from a nominally left-leaning party), and its propensity toward coopting radical-right populist parties, whenever established political parties are deemed insufficiently committed to anti-gender politics. We consider that this article complements previous studies as well as the other contributions to this special issue. It also invites further analyses to disentangle the complex social and political developments in Eastern Europe, which juxtapose increasingly stronger illiberal endeavors, reinterpretations of the neoliberal mantra in a nationalist key, and curated outbursts of religious zeal in a post-communist context.

Notes

1. <https://www.rainbow-europe.org/country-ranking#eu>. Accessed July 2021.
2. The official position of BOR Synod was relayed to the Romanian Parliament and published in its organ *Vestitorul Ortodoxiei* (The Messenger of Orthodoxy), https://vestitorulortodoxiei.ro/articol/ves-titorul_ortodoxiei_2000_09-septembrie_nr-253/. Accessed July 2021.
3. <https://www.gandul.ro/politica/iohannis-mesaj-pentru-cei-care-vor-redefinirea-familiei-in-constitutie-e-gresit-sa-mergem-pe-calea-fanatizmului-religios-15830998>. Accessed July 2021.
4. <http://www.cdep.ro>. Accessed July 2021.
5. <http://www.senat.ro>. Accessed July 2021.
6. We acknowledge the laborious and careful work of Victor Constantin Vladuț in collecting and systematizing the empirical material. The cited quotes were translated into English by the authors.
7. This emulates the US National Prayer Breakfast, which itself testifies to "the proximity between societal power and religious outreach," reuniting the US President and members of Congress, businesspeople, and international invitees under the sponsorship of the International Foundation, a nominally ecumenical non-governmental organization whose "insiders fall within the evangelical fold of American Christianity" (Lindsay 2006, 392–393). The model was exported to Europe, serving as yet another contact surface between various churches, and conservative, Christian Democratic, and radical-right populist MPs (for an analysis of the Finnish context, see Nieminen 2018).
8. The Cathedral of (Romanian) People's Salvation (*Catedrala mântuirii neamului*) is presently the tallest Orthodox cathedral in the world, and is symbolically positioned just behind the palace of Parliament, a Communist-era behemoth project. Initially, BOR claimed that it would erect the building solely from private donations but, controversially, more than 75 percent of the costs have in fact been covered from public funds. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/25/romania-thousands-attend-blessing-of-controversial-cathedral>. Accessed July 2021.
9. <https://newsweek.ro/politica/ce-contine-primul-proiect-de-parteneriat-civil-sustinut-de-toate-partidile-parlamentare>. Accessed July 2021.
10. <https://partidulaur.ro/program/>. Accessed July 2021.

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