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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Anti-gender politics in Finland and Romania

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This study examines the articulation of anti-gender politics in the parliamentary debates centred on two citizens' initiatives in Finland and Romania. Although different in their endeavours (in Finland, supporting equal marriage rights; in Romania, attempting to legislate pre-emptively against them), these citizens' initiatives resulted in significant defeats for the wider anti-gender campaigns in these countries. Examining closely the parliamentary debates ensuing these proposals, we evidence how anti-gender politics developed in ways specific to each examined polity and served as a key vehicle for different manners of retrogressive mobilisation, which bypassed left–right ideological cleavages and party loyalty. We scrutinise critically the discursive scenarios that coalesce in anti-gender politics in the two countries, and we map out both the commonalities and differences between the antithetic narrative scenarios, which hinge on the position of the child within a heteronormative nuclear family and the depiction of marriage equality as a harbinger of an impending societal collapse.

Key words anti-gender politics • equal marriage rights • Finland • lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other non-binary categories (hereinafter LGBT+) policy • retrogressive mobilisation • Romania

Key messages

- Anti-gender politics is a key vehicle for different patterns of retrogressive mobilisation for each national context.
- Retrogressive mobilisations bypass consecrated left–right ideological cleavages (and flirt with political forces further to the radical-right) and transgress party loyalty.
- The discursive scenarios in Finland and Romania centre on the heteronormative nuclear family.

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Introduction

In this article, we analyse the articulation of anti-gender politics in parliamentary debates centred on two different citizens' initiatives in Finland and Romania. More specifically, we critically examine the debates taking place in the *Eduskunta* (Finnish Parliament), addressing the citizens' initiative campaign *Tähdön2013* ('IDo2013') coordinated by several lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other non-binary categories (LGBT+) organisations in support of equal marriage rights. The initiative was fiercely opposed, and the initial recommendation was to reject the legislative proposal based on it. However, the proposal was eventually passed into law, and after facing another series of challenges, it came into effect in 2017. We compare these debates with the deliberations in the *Parlamentul României* (Chambers of the Romanian Parliament), discussing the citizens' initiative driven by the *Coaliția pentru Familie* ('Coalition for Family' [CpF]) in favour of a 'referendum for family' aimed at preventing legislation granting equal marriage rights. Although the proposal was delayed, a referendum was abruptly organised in late 2018. This plebiscite failed, however, due to the low turnout.

In both countries, the plea to defend 'the institution of marriage' embodied a specific manifestation of campaigns against gender and sexual equality that have been seen across the globe (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018: 7; Corrêa, 2020: 12–4; Liao, 2020: 145–6; Zarembeg et al, 2021: 530–2; Edenberg, 2023: 182). These campaigns rest on a 'critique to gender, labelled as "gender ideology," "gender theory" or "(anti)genderism"' (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018: 8), which constitutes the core of their anti-gender politics. They engage a variety of entities, contingent upon national political particularities and social dynamics: conservative and radical-right populist parties, ethnonationalist organisations, and anti-choice civil society groups. These are often encouraged and supported by different religious institutions, for example, national churches or branches of the Catholic Church, and US-based Evangelical churches (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017: 9–15; Liao, 2020: 142; Norocel and Băluță, 2023: 153). Their aim is 'to "normalise" inequalities, hollow out public welfare provision, and reinstate real or imagined gender, social, or racial hierarchies' (Zarembeg et al, 2021: 528). Given our interest in critically examining the ways in which different political forces engage in these anti-gender campaigns in Finland and Romania, our research question is: what discursive scenarios coalesce in anti-gender politics in Finland and Romania? Our argument is that anti-gender politics serve as a key vehicle for different patterns of 'retrogressive mobilisation', which gathers in various constellations depending on each national context, including conservative religious institutions, organisations opposing the rights of women and the LGBT+ community, and radical-right populist and conservative parties. We also flesh out how such retrogressive mobilisations bypass consecrated ideological cleavages between the (ambiguously progressive) left and (conservative-liberal) right, which flirts with political forces further to the radical-right, as well as how they transgress party loyalties, whereby members of parliament (MPs) from the same party endorse completely opposing positions. Their political interventions describe somewhat different beatific scenarios in the two countries, each confirming the hegemonic position of the heteronormative nuclear family. In turn, their construction of doomsday scenarios is strikingly similar, depicting marriage equality as a harbinger of the impending dissolution of the societal fabric in each respective country.

The article is organised into six further sections. The first of these provides contextual detail about the two citizens' initiatives in Finland and Romania. The

second maps out the conceptual terrain of anti-gender politics, describing previous research contributions from Northern and Eastern Europe, and underlining the role of such politics in the wider retrogressive mobilisations in these countries. The third discusses the discourse-analytical approach that we deploy in the analysis of the parliamentary debates, as well as the criteria for selecting the empirical material in the two cases. The analysis is presented in the subsequent two sections, with the first detailing the fullness-to-come scenario and the second presenting the parallel doomsday scenario. The final section provides a concluding discussion, which situates the article's findings within the wider context of research on anti-gender campaigns.

The struggles for equal marriage legislation in Finland and Romania

Citizens' initiatives have been one of the strategies deployed by LGBT+ organisations in their quest to acquire equal marriage rights. In the European context, these also benefited from the encouragement and support of various European Union (EU) institutions (Ayoub and Paternotte, 2014: 9–10; 2020: 156). This notwithstanding, referenda on the topic have generally not led to the legalisation of same-sex marriage, with Ireland being the notable exception (Kondakov, 2023). In fact, plebiscites have served as key instruments in anti-gender campaigns to legislate pre-emptively against equal marriage rights, especially across Eastern Europe (Kuhar, 2017; Mos, 2020; Vučković Juroš et al, 2020; Norocel and Băluță, 2023). The cases selected for this study illustrate two citizens' initiatives that had contrasting aims: one to press for equal marriage rights in Finland; the other to prevent future legislation for equal marriage rights in Romania. Although differing in their aims, these citizens' initiatives resulted in similar outcomes (favourable to the LGBT+ communities in the two countries), despite the anti-gender politics articulated in the two legislatures. Some historical contextualisation is nonetheless necessary.

Among the Nordic countries, Finland was the last to legislate for equal marriage rights. The law on *rekisteröity parisuhde* ('registered partnership') was only passed in 2001, with 99 MPs voting in favour and 84 against. The appellation of registered partnership 'to some Finnish ears recalled the car register or the criminal register' (Rydström, 2011: 66), an unpleasant reminder that same-sex sexual acts had only been decriminalised as late as 1971 (Mustola, 2007: 235–6). In the following years, the various attempts to legislate for equal marriage were repeatedly frustrated by the opposition of several parties, most notably, the conservative *Suomen Kristillisdemokraatit* (Christian Democrats [KD]) and the radical-right populist *Perussuomalaiset* (Finns Party [PS]).

A window of opportunity appeared in 2012, namely, a constitutional amendment that enabled citizens' initiatives (with a minimum of 50,000 valid signatures collected over six months) to be considered by the *Eduskunta*. Consequently, on Finland's national day for equal rights in March 2013, LGBT+ organisations launched the citizens' initiative *Tahdon2013*, which collected 166,851 signatures supporting equal marriage legislation in the permitted six months. The proposed bill entered the parliamentary deliberative circuit but was rejected by the Legal Affairs Committee. This recommendation was nonetheless overruled in the *Eduskunta* plenary session (101 MPs voted in favour of the original proposal). A total of 90 MPs voted against it: 35 from PS, all six from KD, the MP representing the far-right *Muutos 2011* (Change

2011), as well as 29 MPs from the liberal–agrarian *Keskusta* (Centre Party [Kesk]), 15 from the conservative–liberal *Kansallinen Kokoomus* (National Coalition Party [Kok]) and four from other parties. The proposal for equal marriage was signed into law by the Finnish President in February 2015, to take effect in 2017.

As a new cabinet formed in the aftermath of the 2015 elections, reuniting Kok, Kesk and notably, PS, a citizens’ counter–initiative for *Aito avioliitto* (‘Real/Genuine Marriage’) was launched. It was partnered with *La Manif Pour Tous* (Protest for All), the anti–gender movement that had unsuccessfully petitioned the French government to initiate a referendum against ‘marriage for all’, as equal marriage rights were presented (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017: 15). It even borrowed their logo of a ‘traditional family’ (namely, shadows of mother, father, daughter and son) in a display of transnational anti–gender solidarity, echoing similar developments in Italy (Garbagnoli, 2017). The counter–initiative was launched in March 2015 and collected 106,195 signatures with the aim of repealing the equal marriage law. It was subsequently discussed in the Legal Affairs Committee, which recommended rejection, and then in the Eduskunta plenary session, where it was finally rejected by 120 votes. Consequently, the equal marriage law came into effect on 1 March 2017.

As in many other countries in Eastern Europe, LGBT+ organisations in Romania have relied for their lobbying activity on the support of EU institutions. In 2001, this finally resulted in the repeal of legislation criminalising same–sex acts (O’Dwyer, 2018: 196–9). The major opposition to decriminalisation came from outside Parliament, especially the Romanian Orthodox Church, which mobilised the extra–parliamentary support of various conservative, Christian Orthodox and ethnonationalist organisations, as well as the parliamentary weight of radical–right populist parties (Norocel, 2015: 146; Cinpoș, 2021: 424). During the following years, the lobbying efforts for equal marriage rights were frustrated by the opposition of most parliamentary parties and by counter–mobilisation under the Romanian Orthodox Church’s coordination to amend the constitution. Their objective was to pre–emptively narrow down the legal definition of marriage so that it pertained exclusively to the union between a man and a woman (O’Dwyer, 2018: 205–7; Mărgărit, 2019: 1576; Norocel and Băluță, 2023: 153–4). Such an amendment would have then rendered any potential equal marriage legislation unconstitutional.

To this end, in 2015, a citizens’ initiative on a referendum to amend the constitution was launched by the CpF, with the active support of both the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church in Romania. One year later, this initiative had collected approximately three million signatures and entered the parliamentary deliberative circuit. ‘Defending the traditional family’ became a motto that was quickly embraced by several parties on the eve of the 2016 elections. Seizing this opportunity, the CpF signed electoral protocols with some parties, which committed them to pressing the legislation necessary for organising such a plebiscite through the Chambers of Parliament, in exchange for the CpF campaigning in their favour. These parties were the conservative *Partidul Național Liberal* (National Liberal Party [PNL]), the *Alianța Liberalilor și Democraților* (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats [ALDE]) and the nominally left–leaning *Partidul Social Democrat* (Social–Democratic Party [PSD]). When the PSD won the elections, the proposal was successfully passed though the Chambers in 2017, but then it lost momentum, until the embattled PSD leader abruptly tabled the ‘referendum for family’ for two days in October 2018 (Dragolea, 2022: 87). However, this plebiscite failed due to the turnout being below

the 30 per cent threshold (though over 90 per cent of the votes cast were in favour of amending the constitution¹).

Anti-gender politics: theoretical standpoints

In this article, we employ the concept of anti-gender politics, which is indebted to earlier theorisations of ‘opposition to gender+ equality’, which has then coalesced into ‘retrogressive mobilisation’ against ‘gender ideology’ (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018; Verloo, 2018; Toldy and Garraio, 2020; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Norocel and Băluță, 2023). Such opposition has been theorised as a reaction against feminist politics and gender+ equality policy in a manner that aims to influence politics and policymaking in various nations (Verloo, 2018: 6). More recently, it has been mobilised beyond national boundaries to target the EU or the Council of Europe (CoE) (Krizsán and Roggeband, 2021: 226; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022: 3–4). These oppositional forces have been further theorised as displaying populist propensities given their self-proclaimed endeavour to protect ‘ordinary people’ from such elitist projects as international organisations, such figures of global capitalism as George Soros or the ‘medical establishment offering abortion and IVF’ (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022: 7).

Two clarifications are necessary here: one pertains to the ideological toolkit of anti-gender politics, namely, the appropriation of ‘gender’ and the crystallisation of a ‘gender ideology’ (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018; Toldy and Garraio, 2020); the other concerns the forces that are part of such a ‘retrogressive mobilisation’ (Norocel and Băluță, 2023). To begin with, several researchers have argued persuasively that the concept of ‘gender’, as it is used in anti-gender campaigns, should not be confused with the manner in which it has been proposed and developed in gender studies. Instead, it embodies a ‘stretchy category that serves as a screen for collective fears about change, [and] loss of national identity’ (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022: 15), and represents ‘the ideological matrix of the different reforms they try to oppose, which pertain to intimate/sexual citizenship debates, including LGBT rights, reproductive rights, and sex and gender education’ (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018: 8).

Given that ‘reproduction is understood as the genetic principle of society, and children[s] upbringing is considered the essential nucleus of social structural configuration, that is, of the family’ (Toldy and Garraio, 2020: 546), one of the key tenets of the mobilisation against ‘gender ideology’ is the alleged imperative to return to a morality centred on the traditional heteronormative family as a counterbalance to cosmopolitan and modern family constellations (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022: 114–19). At the heart of this lies the image of the ‘innocent and endangered child’, who is presented as an embodiment of the nation’s future, which in Europe, is intimately connected to the continent’s collective racial destiny, ‘understood as the standard-bearer of civilization, often in opposition to Islam’ (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018: 11–2; see also Ferree, 2021: 533; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022: 97). The retrogressive mobilisation around this biologically essentialist discourse about the family must be understood against the wider process of the second demographic transition (Ferree, 2021), which is characterised by both demographic and social transformations. Demographically, this transition signals an increasingly older native population outnumbering children, which makes migrant labour an economic necessity. Socially, it entails significant cultural shifts, with ‘fewer and less gender-binary marriages, more children born outside of state-sanctioned marriage, and more

practical separation between households (coresidential units) and families (normative connectedness) as spatial mobility rises' (Ferree, 2021: 538). To counter these dramatic transformations, 'the restoration of a "national" and/or "traditional" family, along with reified conservative gender roles, is positioned as the most effective solution' (Zarembek et al, 2021: 530).

At the political level, this ideological content is packaged into anti-gender politics, which are incorporated into a wider 'conservative' platform. The appellation 'conservative' here is something of a misnomer because the aforementioned platform is, in fact, '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' (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018: 9–10; see also Graff and Korolczuk, 2022: 15–20; Norocel and Băluță, 2023: 155). Although this 'conservative' platform serves various political purposes depending upon the polity in which it is deployed (such as opposition to equal marriage legislation in Finland and Romania, or opposition to feminist gender theorising in Sweden), it is actually part of 'a coordinated transnational effort to undermine liberal values by democratic means' (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017: 4; see also Corrêa, 2020: 13; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022: 3).

The second clarification concerns who rallies against 'gender ideology'. To address this matter, some researchers have proposed the concept of 'retrogressive mobilisation' to convey the complex assemblage of political parties (both mainstream conservative-right and radical-right populist parties), religious institutions (either with national jurisdictions, like the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland or the Romanian Orthodox Church, or with international jurisdiction, like the Catholic Church), conservative civil-society organisations (militating against women's reproductive rights or against equal marriage rights, like the CpF in Romania) and far-right groups preoccupied with safeguarding the majority population's ethnic and racial purity within the chosen polity (see Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018: 11–3; Norocel and Băluță, 2023: 155). This entails a mutually beneficial interaction between, on the one hand, conservative-right and radical-right populist parties, which all deploy an 'anti-gender rhetoric to increase their moral legitimacy in the eyes of traditionalist voters', and, on the other, 'ultraconservative organizations' that attempt to 'introduce legal changes, gain access to funding and participate in policy-making processes' (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022: 24).

Considering this opportunistic aspect, however, some researchers have argued compellingly for the need to disentangle complex realities and avoid the kind of ready-made and hasty conceptualisations that have often been developed in other settings (Norocel and Paternotte, 2023). Indeed, several studies have revealed that the mobilisations against 'gender ideology' are contingent upon historical legacies in each polity, for example, the uneven influence of the Catholic Church in Poland and Hungary. Meanwhile, in countries with Christian Orthodox majorities, like Romania and Serbia, it is the national Christian Orthodox churches that are key oppositional forces (Mos, 2020; Cinpoș, 2021; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). In addition, it is also important to consider distinct political cultures, such as the programmatic recruitment of individual radical-right populist MPs by mainstream parties in Romania (Norocel and Băluță, 2023), along with different opportunity structures, such as its use for the consolidation of power by radical-right populist parties in Poland or promoting

'traditional values' as a means to entrench the autocratic regime in the Russian Federation (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Edenborg, 2023). With this in mind, we argue that the concept of retrogressive mobilisation helps us to reveal the illiberal endeavours of anti-gender politics given that they rest not only on an effort to bring about a conservative shift in relation to social norms, civil liberties and human rights but also on programmatic exclusionary politics that are tailored to the politics in which they are deployed.

Equipped with this theoretical understanding, we decided to examine anti-gender politics within a comparative framework in order to capture the varying contours of the political geography of this retrogressive mobilisation in the Finnish and Romanian parliaments. Our intention is to contribute to the burgeoning field of studies of anti-gender campaigns (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017; Verloo, 2018; Corrêa, 2020; Krizsán and Roggeband, 2021; Zarembeg et al, 2021; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Norocel and Paternotte, 2023). More explicitly, we add further nuances to empirical analyses examining how referenda have been deployed as devices supporting anti-gender campaigns in Eastern Europe (Kuhar, 2017; Mos, 2020; Vučković Juroš et al, 2020) and set the handful of critical analyses on Romania in a comparative perspective (Mărgărit, 2019; Dragolea, 2022; Norocel and Băluță, 2023; Soare and Tufiş, 2023). By the same measure, we contribute to expanding the empirical analyses of Northern Europe, which has been an under-researched area (but see Giritli-Nygren et al, 2018; Hansen, 2021). Consequently, we build upon existing scholarship addressing the complex gender dynamics between conservatism, radical-right populism and religion in Finland (Sakki and Pettersson, 2016; Saresma, 2018; Keskinen, 2018; Nieminen, 2018; Kantola and Lombardo, 2019; Norocel and Pettersson, 2022; Norocel et al, 2022), as explicit scholarly analyses of anti-gender campaigns are yet to be published.²

Methodological notes

Methodologically, we deploy an amended form of political discourse theory, in which the key methodological tool is that of 'logic', which pertains to the intrinsic qualities of different entities and the relations among them in a particular socio-political context, ensuring their discursive functioning within that context (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). Putting this into the wider post-structuralist context: if, from a Laclaudian perspective, discourses are defined as 'articulatory practices', then logics convey 'those processes that inform and structure such practices or regimes of practices' (Glynos et al, 2021: 67). This is operationalised along three interpretive registers: social logics, political logics and phantasmatic logics.

More precisely, social logics are multiple and highly contextual, and enable us to 'characterise a practice in terms of its dominant, sedimented norms' (Glynos et al, 2015: 395) 'by capturing their rules and elucidating the properties of the objects presupposed by the practice' (Glynos et al, 2021: 65). The social logic of the heteronormative family, which privileges the nuclear organisation of family life (father, mother and their biological offspring), is hegemonic in both our cases. However, in Finland, it is juxtaposed against that of gender equality within a strong welfare state, which acknowledges women as equal to men, at least declaratively (Keskinen, 2018: 158; Norocel and Pettersson, 2022: 436). In contrast, in Romania, this social logic is underpinned by women's subordinate role to men as heads of family (Norocel and Băluță, 2023: 156).

Political logics entail ‘the way in which political frontiers are constructed (or broken down) by rendering social demands and identities equivalent (or different)’ (Glynos et al, 2021: 65). Hence, political logics work as ‘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 et al, 2015: 395). They condense social space into two antagonistic camps, consequently preventing the crystallisation of dissent within these camps. Their effect in Finland is the intersection of the social logics of the heteronormative family and gender equality, which proclaims gender equality a *fait accompli* within Finnish families, relegating issues of inequality to migrant communities suspected of patriarchal backwardness and religious extremism (Islamism) (Norocel and Pettersson, 2022: 436). In Romania, the social logic of the ‘traditional family’ rests on nationalist and religious celebrations of ‘maternity as the biological, social, and symbolic destiny of women, thus constituting “natural” heteronormative families, understood to be Romanian and Christian (Orthodox)’ (Norocel and Băluță, 2023: 156).

Lastly, phantasmatic logics document the ideological work that projects a seemingly harmonious whole, centred on the social logic at hand, with the purpose of precluding political opposition and resistance (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 145–6). They convey the discursive construction of ‘certain phantasmatic narratives or ideals which structure the ways subjects are attached to certain signifiers, and on the different types of “enjoyment” subjects procure in identifying with discourses and the holding of particular beliefs’ (Glynos et al, 2021: 65). These phantasmatic narratives are of two kinds: a beatific scenario that promises social harmony and salvation provided the obstacle hindering the defended social logic is overcome; and, alternatively, an apocalyptic scenario that is underpinned by impotence and victimhood, marking the defeat of the social logic and the catastrophic social decline following in its wake (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 147). Deploying these phantasmatic logics enables us to discern in the empirical material the contours of both the promised fullness-to-come that the retrogressive mobilisation in the two parliaments envisioned if gender-equal marriage legislation was successfully blocked, and the doomsday scenario that would come about as a direct consequence if the retrogressive mobilisations on the matter were to fail. These phantasmatic logics provide important clues about the broader social and political logics pursued by the retrogressive parliamentary mobilisations in Finland and Romania.

Considering this, our strategy for collecting empirical material³ has been the following. In Finland, we selected the time frame 2014–17, when both the citizens’ initiative *Tahdon2013* and the subsequent counter-initiative against equal marriage legislation were being hotly debated in the various parliamentary committees and then voted upon in the *Eduskunta* plenary sessions, until the equal marriage law finally came into force in early 2017. In Romania, we chose the time frame 2015–18, beginning when the CpF initiative was introduced for deliberation in various committees in *Parlamentul României* and continuing until the so-called ‘referendum for family’ was eventually organised and subsequently failed in late 2018.

Given these time frames, we drafted a list of keywords in Finnish and Romanian that conveyed the general meanings of the two phantasmatic scenarios, as described in Table 1. In this manner, we collected 105 items in Finnish and 144 items in Romanian from both plenary and committee debates. Importantly, as the selected time frames extend over two parliamentary mandates in both Finland (2011–15 and

Table 1: Breakdown of keywords per phantasmatic scenario in both Finnish and Romanian in original (in italics) and with their English translation (within parentheses)

Phantasmatic scenarios	Finland	Romania
Fullness-to-come scenario	<i>perinteinen perhe</i> ('traditional family') <i>luonnollinen perhe</i> ('natural family') <i>avioliitto</i> ('marriage') <i>kristilliset arvot</i> ('Christian values')/ <i>lutherilaisuus</i> ('[Christian] Lutheran') <i>rekisteröity parisuhde</i> ('registered partnership')	<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> ('[Christian] Orthodox') <i>referendum pentru familie</i> ('referendum for family')
Doomsday scenario	<i>LGBT-ideologia</i> ('LGBT ideology') <i>sukupuoli-ideologia</i> ('gender ideology') <i>tasa-arvoinen avioliittolaki</i> ('equal marriage law') <i>homoseksuaali/gay/LGBT</i> ('homosexual/gay/LGBT')	<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')

2015–19) and Romania (2012–16 and 2016–20), we have documented each MP's political affiliation when intervening in the debate and monitored for potential party change during the mandate. We did so because although the parliamentary groups in Finland are fairly stable, in Romania, the major political parties (namely, the PSD and PNL) programmatically cannibalise the radical-right populist parties by recruiting their MPs, as occurred during the analysed period to the *Partidul Poporului–Dan Diaconescu* (People's Party–Dan Diaconescu [PP–DD]).

As we collected the empirical material, we detected traces of 'opportunistic synergies' (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). We noticed that those MPs articulating anti-gender politics in their parliamentary interventions frequently appeared among the members and participants of the elusive and selective Finnish *Suomen kansallinen rukousaamiainen* ('national prayer breakfast') and the *micul dejun cu rugăciune* ('prayer breakfast') organised by the Ecumenical Prayer Group in *Parlamentul României*. These settings are local adaptations of the US National Prayer Breakfast, which reunites the US political and economic establishments with international guests under the tutelage of the International Foundation, a nominally ecumenical non-governmental organisation whose 'insiders fall within the evangelical fold of American Christianity' (Lindsay, 2006: 392–3). In Finland, previous research has revealed that this setting functions as an additional contact space between representatives of various churches and MPs from the conservative KD and Kok, as well as the radical-right populist PS, whereby the US 'culture wars' antagonism has been adapted to the Finnish context as opposition to 'cultural Marxism', 'gender ideology' and Islamophobic sentiments (Nieminen, 2018).

The promised fullness-to-come: the heteronormative nuclear family as a hegemonic social institution

The beatific scenarios display malleable contours in both the Finnish and the Romanian empirical material, frequently being articulated as a preservation of the status quo, namely, defining the institution of marriage as the exclusive monopoly

of the heteronormative nuclear family. In Finland, the fullness-to-come scenario was influenced by the manner in which the entire debate concerning equal marriage rights was framed. The need to legislate for equal marriage was underpinned by arguments based on fundamental human rights and democratic principles, as well as respecting international treaties. Those against it, predominantly MPs from the KD and PS, also resorted to the vocabulary of fundamental rights (as well as the Kok MP, 27 November 2014; KD MP, 27 November 2014; PS MP, 27 November 2014; KD MP, 8 September 2016). Their counterargument was that the existing marriage legislation enshrined the rights of heterosexual Christian citizens (to preserve ‘their’ marriage rights), as well as the rights of children (to a biological father and mother). Consequently, the institution of registered partnership, it was suggested, was sufficient to guarantee non-discrimination against LGBT+ citizens and, concomitantly, to respect the rights of other (heterosexual) citizens, thus fulfilling Finland’s obligations under international human rights treaties. Furthermore, this scenario emphasised the preservation of Finnish traditions, of which heterosexual marriage was a ‘natural’ part, within a rapidly changing world – an argument that echoes similar developments elsewhere (Zarembeg et al, 2021: 530; see also Edenberg, 2023: 180). This stance was poignantly articulated when the *Aito avioliitto* counter-initiative reached the *Eduskunta*:

The world is changing rapidly, and it is easy to be engaged in that change.... I think it is important to stop and think about the things that are good and valuable to preserve in this society. I hope that this citizens’ initiative will receive fair treatment, and I hope that marriage between a man and a woman will continue to be respected and maintained in this country. (KD MP, 8 September 2016)

Another important aspect of the fullness-to-come scenario is the strong narrative symbiosis between (Lutheran) Christian traditions (given the dominant position still held by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland in the country due to a legacy of previously being a state church [Norocel and Pettersson, 2022: 430]), the institution of marriage (narrowly defined as the heteronormative union between a man and a woman) and the imperative to preserve the Finnish nation through (natural) biological reproduction (KD MP, 27 November 2014). Hence, the particular Christian view of marriage as the institution that legitimates the union between a man and a woman for the purpose of producing offspring was depicted as pivotal for ensuring a future for societal (including Christian) traditions, values and norms. This stance was most fervently supported by MPs from the KD and PS (several of these intervened in the debates on 27 November 2014 and 8 June 2016). In this vein, an illustrative remark was:

marriage is a union between a man and a woman according to the Christian view of humanity; God has created man and woman, and the task of that man and that woman is to have a child, to continue life, to build a family, to give that child a home. (KD MP, 27 November 2014)

In Romania, the fullness-to-come scenario was reinforced by ‘the triad of religion (unmistakably Orthodox), nationhood (ethnically Romanian), and family (staunchly heteronormative)’ (Norocel and Băluță, 2023: 157), centred obsessively on the child.

We identified it in various interventions that bypassed political cleavages, from both radical-right populist (or initially elected as such) representatives (PP–DD MP, 31 March 2015; former PP–DD/later PSD MP, 17 March 2016; former PP–DD/later independent, 12 May 2015) and opposition conservative representatives (various PNL MPs on 24 October 2016, 14 March 2017 and 10 October 2018), as well as from those in power (various PSD MPs on 3 December 2015, 27 September 2016, 5 September 2018, 19 September 2018, 3 October 2018 and 10 October 2018).

With its insistence on the ‘Christian roots of the Romanian nation’ (PSD MP, 27 September 2016), the plebiscite was presented as the solution to Romania’s demographic decline. Once reconfirmed in its normative position, the ‘traditional family’ was to secure an improved ‘birth rate and the education of children in a modern, balanced family, oriented towards the traditional values of the Romanian people’ (PSD MP, 9 May 2018). Furthermore, the promised success of the referendum was compared to the construction of the Cathedral of (Romanian) People’s Salvation by the Orthodox Church, with lavish state support. Both were deemed to announce an auspicious future given that the final element of the triad (nationalism) was celebrating 100 years of Romanian statehood during that year:

I am referring to the noteworthy achievement of the Romanian Orthodox Church at the centennial anniversary: the National Cathedral, a historic achievement.... And, finally, an achievement of Romania’s civil society, the referendum for the family, the referendum that defends the natural family and the law 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, honour 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 within a strong Romania. (PNL MP, 19 September 2018)

When the referendum failed, a heated debate unfolded in Parlamentul României, as several progressive MPs submitted proposals for the legal recognition of same-sex unions in the form of *parteneriat civil* (‘civil partnerships’), following the French model. Retrogressive mobilisation was fierce, the ‘LGBT+ lobby’ was accused of pressing forward, through its ‘Brussels channels’, the civil partnership law, which was declared to be merely ‘marriage undercover’. Consequently, it was proclaimed the duty of all Romanians, regardless of their religion, political affiliation or ethnicity, to combat these ‘cultural-Marxist elements’ and resist ‘being run over by the pink tank’ (PNL MP, 10 October 2018). Such appeals were not the monopoly of conservative PNL MPs. Several MPs of the governing PSD also argued that it was time ‘to rediscover traditional values and see those around us, regardless of their opinions, as part of a large Romanian family’ (PSD MP, 10 October 2018). They motivated their opposition to the legislative proposal with the fact that ‘family and private life are [already] guaranteed in the broad, comprehensive formulas of Art. 26 of the 1991 Constitution, which is still valid today’ (PSD MP, 29 October 2018). Consequently, LGBT+ families were relegated to a precarious legal position, dependent upon the whims of MPs who asserted their legislative monopoly as the ‘true’ representatives of the will of ‘all Romanians’, rebelling against the social-engineering agenda stemming from ‘Brussels’ (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018: 10; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022: 89; Soare and Tufiş, 2023: 125).

The doomsday scenario: marriage equality as harbinger of societal dissolution

The apocalyptic scenarios are depicted with bold strokes in both the Finnish and the Romanian empirical material, describing the failure to stop equal marriage rights as the first sign of an inevitable societal collapse. In Finland, the doomsday scenario rested on a rhetorical confrontation between the child's rights (to a biological father and mother) and equal marriage rights. This discursive construction was most frequently deployed by representatives of Christian-conservative and radical-right populist parties (several KD and PS MPs on 27 November 2014 and 8 June 2016). This notwithstanding, it was mobilised across the political spectrum, including by representatives from social-democratic, agrarian-liberal and conservative-right parties (Kok MP, 27 November 2014; SDP MP, 27 November 2014; Kesk MP, 8 June 2016). The contrast is stark, 'the child' (and the future embodied therein) demanded 'limits to adult freedom' and constituted 'an end in itself, so he or she must not be used as a means by which adults seek to realise their own goals and desires' (PS MP, 27 November 2014). This blunt warning, addressed to Finnish MPs, seems to be recycling the caution deployed by *La Manif pour Tous* in its French brochure, which stated that 'gender ideology is destructive, obscurantist, anti-social, anti-popular as much as it is anti-natural' (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017: 4; in the Nordic context, see also Giritli-Nygren et al, 2018: 4–6; Hansen, 2021: 67–9). It also appears to echo the Vatican's admonition that a 'culture of death' underpins the selfishness of modern adults in Western societies, who act on a whim and resort too easily to abortion, contraception and euthanasia (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017: 5–6):

A culture that puts adult freedoms ahead of children's fundamental rights is sick. If legislators can take something as precious as mum or dad away from us, what else can they take? It is unfair and discriminatory to make it a legal, normal situation for a child to be systematically separated from their biological father or mother from birth simply because adults consider marriage so defined to be their right. Gay marriage should be just an emotional thing where one does not think about biological aspects but throws oneself into being carried away by emotions. (PS MP, 27 November 2014)

In this context, the right to marriage equality was not only dismissed as a mere 'emotional thing' that wilfully disregards biology but also accused of allowing a whimsical decision to have dire consequences for society, threatening to tear apart the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (with members fleeing en masse were it to become mandatory for its priests to wed all couples in church) and paving the way for a future in which polygamy and child marriage would be legalised (several PS MPs, 27 November 2014; PS and KD MPs, 8 September 2016). These apocalyptic accounts of the Finnish polity descending into moral relativity and societal normlessness were often connected to descriptions of neighbouring Sweden as a 'warning example'. Where Sweden had previously been depicted as a polity on the brink of collapse due to its lax immigration policy (Sakki and Pettersson, 2016), in the context of these debates, it was now described as a country that had failed to reign in 'gender-neutral ideologies' and allowed them to 'go too far', leading to identity crises among Swedish youth and, ultimately, the eradication of 'natural differences' between the sexes (KD and PS MPs, 8 September 2016).

In Romania, the doomsday scenario reinforced the idea that a nefarious ‘LGBT+ lobby’, under the protection of ‘Brussels’, was enacting a propaganda campaign fuelled by ‘LGBT+ ideology’, with the purpose of imposing a foreign and even immoral legal framework that would trigger the erosion of the family as a social and political institution. *In extenso*, this would lead to the effacing of the Romanian nation. Yet again, we documented this argument across the political divides in interventions from both radical-right populist representatives (PP-DD MP, 31 March 2015) and conservative representatives (various PNL MPs on 14 March 2017, 5 September 2017 and 19 September 2018), as well as from those in power (several PSD MPs on 3 December 2015, 19 September 2017, 12 September 2018, 3 October 2018 and 31 October 2018).

Reminiscent of the Finnish debates, among these interventions, one emphasised the ‘slippery slope’ of ‘first legislating civil partnerships, followed by equal marriage law, then adoption rights by same-sex couples, and finally legalisation of access to assisted-reproduction techniques’ that are all part of ‘an assault of the ideology of genders [sic!]’ (PSD MP, 11 October 2016). This stance was a recurring element in the debates we examined, bridging ideological cleavages (PNL MP 24 October 2016; PNL MP, 14 March 2017; PSD MP, 31 October 2018). The ‘ideologues of “gay families”’ were accused of trying to achieve these goals through gradual alterations of the vocabulary employed to describe the institution of the family by substituting the rigidly gendered pairs of ‘mother–father’ and ‘wife–husband’ with the gender-neutral ‘parent 1–parent 2’ and ‘partner 1–partner 2’, and through enforcing the same ‘suffocating form of self-censorship [at work] in public in Western Europe and the United States’, which is designed to ‘marginalise [those] opposing the idea that reality is an artificial construct ... and can be changed ideologically by changing the language of the law’ (PSD MP, 31 October 2018).

Moreover, this ‘anti-family ideology’ (PSD MP, 31 October 2018) was depicted as an imminent danger to ‘the child’ (and the future promise thereof) and echoes similar arguments deployed in other anti-gender campaigns in Eastern Europe (Kuhar, 2017; Mos, 2020; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). They all share an endeavour to ‘defend the right of a child to have a father and a mother ... and the parents’ freedom to raise their children as they wish’ (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017: 1–2). Illustratively, one such intervention equated the failure to prevent equal marriage legislation (by not voting for the ‘traditional family’ in the referendum) with heading ‘towards the destruction of Christian values and its [Romania’s] national identity’, and warned that this would have apocalyptic consequences because 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 way as the two great totalitarianisms, Nazism and Communism, have led’ (PNL MP, 5 September 2017). Putting this into a regional context, however, other researchers have already documented how in Slovenia, ‘gender ideology’ was deemed to be ‘Marxism 2.0’ (Kuhar, 2017: 221–2), and how in Poland, it was declared even ‘worse than communism and Nazism put together’ (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022: 67–91).

Concluding discussion

In this article, we have studied the articulation of anti-gender politics in the parliamentary debates originating from two citizens’ initiatives in Finland and Romania. Although different in their aims (*Tahdon2013* supporting equal marriage

rights in Finland; CpF aiming to legislate pre-emptively against similar rights in Romania), these citizens' initiatives both resulted in significant defeats for the wider anti-gender campaigns in these countries. This notwithstanding, we have revealed how anti-gender politics developed in ways that were specific to each examined polity and served as a key vehicle for different kinds of retrogressive mobilisation. We have provided evidence that anti-gender politics is not the sole monopoly of the (conservative-liberal) right, which flirts with political forces further to the radical-right, but may also be deployed by the (ambiguously progressive) left. Anti-gender politics is frequently supported by MPs from conservative-right and radical-right parties (KD and PS in Finland; PNL and PP-DD in Romania), though they also transgress party loyalties, as MPs from the same party take completely opposing positions. This is generally the case with MPs from social-democratic (both SDP in Finland and PSD in Romania) and liberal-agrarian and conservative-liberal parties (Kesk and Kok in Finland).

Examining more closely the discursive scenarios that draw anti-gender politics together, we noted the relative brevity of beatific scenarios in comparison to the more richly detailed apocalyptic scenarios (see [Norocel and Pettersson, 2022](#)). The beatific scenarios in the two countries cement the hegemonic position of the heteronormative nuclear family. However, in Finland, the emphasis was on the preservation of (Lutheran) Christian values and the Finnish traditions they underpin, and on the defence of the child's right to a (heterosexual) family. In Romania, in contrast, the figure of the child emerged at the intersection of the triad of Orthodox religion, Romanian nationhood and an unwaveringly heteronormative family construction. Bearing this in mind, the assembly of the doomsday scenarios is surprisingly similar in Finland and Romania, with the depiction of marriage equality emphasising it as a harbinger of impending societal collapse.

Our comparative study makes a number of contributions. First, it makes a theoretical contribution, providing evidence for the manner in which anti-gender politics serves as a key vehicle for different patterns of retrogressive mobilisation. Deploying the concept to examine the parliamentary debates addressing equal marriage legislation, we have revealed how anti-gender politics (particularly in the Romanian case) is embraced across consecrated ideological cleavages between the (ambiguously progressive) left and (conservative-liberal) right. This flirts with political forces further to the radical-right, as well as transversally within parties, with MPs from the same party frequently endorsing completely opposing positions. Furthermore, the concept has allowed us to provide evidence of the illiberal aims of anti-gender politics, which packages exclusionary politics under the guise of promoting a conservative shift regarding social norms, civil liberties and rights.

Second, it makes a series of empirical contributions. This study is among the first academic analyses to add a Finnish perspective to previous studies examining anti-gender campaigns in Northern Europe ([Giritly-Nygren et al, 2018](#); [Hansen, 2021](#)). Furthermore, it adds complexity to analyses of anti-gender campaigns aiming to legislate pre-emptively against equal marriage rights, especially across Eastern Europe ([Kuhar, 2017](#); [Mos, 2020](#); [Vučković Juroš et al, 2020](#)). Additionally, it contributes comparative insights to existing critical studies focusing on Romania ([Mărgărit, 2019](#); [Dragolea, 2022](#); [Norocel and Băluță, 2023](#); [Soare and Tufiş, 2023](#)). This article invites further analyses to expand and deepen the accounts of retrogressive mobilisation in the Nordic region, and to examine the entanglements between the growing affinity

between conservative-right and radical-right populist political forces, manifest as anti-gender politics, and the societal transformations in various polities across Europe that are mobilised by means of citizens' initiatives and plebiscites.

Notes

¹ See: <http://referendum2018.bec.ro/rezultate/>

² Julian Honkasalo, Risto Saarinen and Tuija Saresma have published popular analyses in *Politiikasta* (in Finnish), see: <https://politiikasta.fi/category/gender-ideologia/>

³ We complied fully with the deontological guidelines of ethical research, as vetted by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (*Etikprövningsmyndigheten*) (Dnr 2022-01923-01). The translations from Finnish and Romanian into English are by the authors.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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