

No, Reactionary Gender Warriors Aren't "Anti-Elitist"

Saturday 12 August 2023, by [DUŠKOVÁ Magdalena](#), [KOLDOVÁ Eliška](#), [KOROLCZUK Elżbieta](#) (Date first published: 18 July 2023).

Right-wing governments around Europe are funneling state funds to reactionary lobbies in the name of resisting "gender ideology." Their supposed anti-elitism is a fraud.

From [Catholic reactionaries](#) in Spain to [Kremlin ideologues](#) obsessed with birth rates, the ardent defenders of traditional gender roles today call themselves "anti-gender" — using the English word "gender" to mean a mix of feminist and queer causes. But if protesters demanding "[gender out of schools!](#)" send a confusing message, what is "anti-gender" really about?

Beyond its own damnation of "gender ideology," we can see "anti-gender" as a global illiberal civil society. Connecting right-wing populist parties, ultraconservative church leaders, transnational organizations such as Ordo Iuris, and neoliberal and conservative politicians and lobbyists, the representatives of anti-gender discourse are united by ideology and shared political objectives. In recent times, they have resisted the [Istanbul Convention](#) on violence against women, opposed antidiscrimination legislation and sex education, and blocked legislative efforts to equalize the rights of LGBTQ people.

One essential book for understanding this phenomenon is [Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment](#), by Polish academics Elżbieta Korolczuk and Agnieszka Graff. The authors reveal the strategies of the global anti-gender movement and its political connections, explain why it has succeeded in its fight to restrict reproductive rights around the world, and propose concrete strategies to counter these reactionaries.

In an interview, coauthor Elżbieta Korolczuk spoke to Magdalena Dušková and Eliška Koldová about the anti-gender movement's strategies in different countries and what kind of mobilizations can stop it in its tracks.

MAGDALENA DUŠKOVÁ | In your book [Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment](#), you speak of an "opportunistic synergy" between different anti-gender forces. Let's perhaps start by repeating who these actors actually are and how they benefit from this mutual cooperation.

ELŻBIETA KOROLCZUK | By this term we refer to the ideological and organizational synergy between movements, religious actors, and political parties — a synergy that is anchored in anti-gender rhetoric. Many organizations behind the anti-gender campaigns, such as the [World Congress of Families](#) or various European anti-choice groups, have been active in the public space since the 1990s. So, at the beginning of our work, my colleague Agnieszka Graff and I asked ourselves: Why have they become so powerful right now, and how do they have such an influence on politics?

ELIŠKA KOLDOVÁ | Many political actors on the Right have only recently started to use "anti-

gender” rhetoric and support gender-conservative solutions, such as banning abortions, restricting the rights of queer people, or opposing legislation supporting survivors of domestic violence. Why have people like Matteo Salvini or Donald Trump, who are not particularly religious themselves, suddenly taken on the role of supporters of traditional families and defenders of innocent children against “genderism”?

ELŻBIETA KOROLCZUK | We observed that although these actors are not necessarily ideologically anchored in an ultraconservative worldview, they employ this discourse to achieve specific political gains. Current right-wing politics is largely based on the mobilization of a vocal minority and deepening polarization around cultural issues. For example, in the Polish or Italian context, this vocal minority is Catholics and people who feel threatened by current social and cultural changes.

Representatives of the populist right seek to be perceived as the leaders of these groups and to mobilize people around cultural issues. This is enabled precisely by the opportunistic synergy — a cooperation between civil society actors, religious fundamentalists, and right-wing populist politicians, who can, through this connection, strengthen the otherwise very weak ideological roots of right-wing populism and moralize the divide between us and them.

The populist right usually tries to convince the population that there are corrupt elites out there that threaten “the people.” Anti-gender discourse allows them to moralize the divide as a moral issue, not just a struggle between those with power and those without. The abyss between “people” and “elites” deepens and political debate turns into a Manichean struggle between good and evil.

Moreover, anti-gender rhetoric allows them to redefine the question of who is the oppressed minority, so that, for example, LGBTQ people or women fighting for reproductive freedoms are depicted not only as immoral but also as part of the global liberal elites, and thus violent acts committed against them by anti-gender actors are justified self-defense. Anti-gender has a very strong, emotional dynamic. It enables the mobilization of people, who thus gain a sense of unity and justice. It allows them to feel righteous, as if they are truly the “defenders of innocent children against perverts.”

Changing the elites is part and parcel of this opportunistic synergy. In the right-wing populists’ designs, the representatives of religious groups and ultraconservative civil society organizations are meant to become the new cadres of various state bodies, join advisory committees, or even take up key executive positions within the state administration. Civil society and religious actors work closely with political representatives of the right-wing populist parties; they help each other ideologically, organizationally, but also financially. In many countries, state funds are allocated to these organizations, which in return are loyal to the state. The opportunistic synergy benefits all parties involved.

MAGDALENA DUŠKOVÁ | How is it that the populist right is so successful with its anti-gender agenda? What mistakes have the liberal elites and perhaps also the Left made?

ELŻBIETA KOROLCZUK | Many liberals, but unfortunately also supporters of the Left, tend to still differentiate between cultural and economic rights as if they were two separate sets of issues, and the rights of women, LGBTQ, or racialized people are treated as related to culture. This is not only a political and strategic mistake, but above all it does not reflect reality. While we talk about the need to overcome stereotypes and change discriminatory language about representation and generally about culture, equality also has economic and social dimensions. Whose work is valued and whose is left unpaid? Who provides care? Who has access to resources? These are questions that we often miss if we focus on identity and representation.

The success of right-wing populists, especially in countries like Poland and Hungary, lies largely in the fact that they were able to link cultural and socioeconomic issues, by combining an ultraconservative agenda with a new system of social support, creating a welfare-chauvinist system. In Poland, it takes the form of the 500+ program, under which families receive 500 zlotys (\$125) per month for each child under age eighteen. In Hungary, welfare chauvinism is reflected in subsidies for middle-class white families active on the labor market. It is a chauvinist system because any nonnormative individuals or families, such as migrants, Roma people, or single mothers, cannot benefit.

Most current social problems are connected with the effects of neoliberalism, and anti-gender discourses are used to tap into people's anxieties and loss of hope. In countries like Poland, liberals believe that the free market is necessary in the democratization process — it is part of the package. The Left, on the other hand, often focuses only on the economic criticism of neoliberalism — they talk about precarious working conditions or poor labor rights.

Meanwhile, the populist right has succeeded in voicing a critique of neoliberalism that links the cultural and economic. They portray liberalism, gender equality, and identity politics as the main source of rampant individualism, alienation, and breakdown of local communities that go hand in hand with late capitalism. Right-wing populists in Europe say: only the family will save us from the ubiquitous decline, and therefore the state must protect it at all costs — that is, only the “right” type of family. Therefore, we cannot interpret anti-gender only as a reflection of the religious beliefs of the vocal minority and its conservatism. The anti-gender campaigns can be interpreted as a reactionary response to neoliberalism.

ELIŠKA KOLDOVÁ | Anti-gender narratives contain both an appeal for the creation of a new global moral order and strongly nationalist sentiments. What binds these two seemingly contradictory types of expressions?

ELŻBIETA KOROLCZUK | If we look at the structure of anti-gender campaigns, it is clear that it is a global movement. At the same time, they always try to appear locally rooted and close to the people. It is not a new phenomenon, really. The Catholic Church has operated as a multinational corporation with branches all over the world for millennia now. At the same time, it is seemingly “authentic” and connected to national identity in each country.

The Church is the epitome of globalization and cultural colonization as it has historically tried to spread its values to other countries using violence and coercion. This doesn't prevent the anti-gender actors from using anti-colonial rhetoric — they claim that the national Catholics (or more broadly Christians) are the oppressed and the global liberal elites represent the colonizer.

It is precisely in our region that such a strategy became successful. For the last thirty years, Central and Eastern Europe has been catching up with the West, its economic success and supposedly well-functioning democracy. But in the anti-gender narrative, we are ultimately the ones that the West should follow and learn from, because, it is said, the much-celebrated Western democracies are degenerating.

I currently work in Sweden, which is often portrayed as morally degenerate and torn apart by Muslim minorities. Polish ultraconservatives love to hate Sweden and wait for every sign that the country is nearing collapse. Anti-gender discourse works with strong emotional dynamics of pride and shame. For a long time, we were ashamed of the fact that our society is not developed enough, and now we can finally be proud of the fact that we are the ones from whom other countries should learn from and gradually create a new world's moral order. It's a very compelling story we tell ourselves. And stories are very important to politics.

MAGDALENA DUŠKOVÁ | In the Czech Republic, the anti-gender discourse is much more secular than, for example, in Poland, mainly because of the atheistic nature of our society. In the book, you claim that it is an ideology that is flexible and yet internally coherent.

In the first text of our series, we wrote that the Czech anti-gender resembles a chameleon. Can the seemingly secular presentation of Czech organizations such as the so-called Movement for Life or Alliance for the Family be an example of successful balancing between flexibility and internal coherence of anti-gender?

ELŻBIETA KOROLCZUK | Definitely, yes. Flexibility is also related to the aforementioned division into West and East. We can demonstrate this in the attacks on gender studies. For example, in Sweden, the efforts to limit gender studies are justified by claims that it is a nonscientific discipline. Right-wing columnist Ivar Arpi claims that gender studies is a religion rather than science. In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, however, gender studies often symbolize a Western colonial import and are seen as an attack on religion.

Similarly, flexibility manifests itself in the balance between open misogyny or homophobia on the one hand and [homonationalism or femonationalism](#) on the other. In Poland, politicians openly present homophobic and transphobic attitudes, whereas in Sweden they are more refined and much more subtle in this area, talking for example about protecting Swedish women and Swedish gays from Muslim barbarians from the East who allegedly want to rape and murder them.

Anti-gender discourse can adapt its language to the local context and local needs. However, at its core it is always the tendency to moralize political differences and deepen the division between the people and the elites. And as I have already mentioned, anti-gender actors position themselves as defenders of ordinary people, which allows them to justify committing violence. This brings us to the question of where anti-gender campaigns actually end and where fascism begins.

ELIŠKA KOLDOVÁ | When I talk to my Czech friends of the same age, many are convinced that abortion will never be banned here or that measures like Poland's LGBTQ-free zones cannot be introduced, precisely because we are one of the most atheist countries in the world. Representatives of Czech anti-gender, however, use a strategy of "gradual crawling," slowly testing how far they can go. Sometimes they don't quite succeed and reveal their true colors, like when they [criticized](#) the provision of emergency contraception for rape survivors during the war in Ukraine.

Sometimes I feel like one day we'll wake up and we will no longer have the same rights, without realizing when we actually lost them. That's why I'm interested: What can we learn from anti-gender's impact in Poland, where its strategy is so different?

ELŻBIETA KOROLCZUK | Yes, it is possible to wake up one day and realize that certain rights have been taken away from us without realizing when it happened, especially if we pay little attention to politics. But this kind of change is usually a long process. Personally, I see great danger in how anti-gender and anti-choice activists take over and exploit the language of human rights and various feminist concepts. They take a certain word, like "women's rights," change its meaning and add a great emotional charge to it.

Language matters, and we can see it very clearly in the outcomes of opinion polls. Their results will be different if you ask the same people if they want to "protect unborn children with disabilities" or if they would like to "force pregnant women to carry a fetus with abnormalities to term, even if the child dies shortly after birth." Anti-gender advocates also often connect antiabortion rhetoric with the protection of women, especially in the socioeconomic realm.

It is easy to dismiss Poland as a “special case” because the Catholic Church has a much stronger position here than in the Czech Republic, not necessarily morally, but politically. I think, however, that you have to be careful all the time. If you look at the campaigns or events organized by Czech anti-gender organizations you can see that most of the time priests participate in or lead these campaigns. Today, many religious fundamentalists are able to promote ultraconservative views under the pretense that they are a matter of conscience or common sense, seemingly disconnected from religion.

So, I think that now more than ever we must be aware of what values we stand for and what language we use to fight for them. We must be aware of our ideological anchoring. If the language of human rights is contaminated by anti-gender rhetoric, it will be much more difficult for the general population to recognize what the debate is actually about, especially for people who may not have much knowledge on the issue.

How to do it? An example can be taken from the Polish feminist protests, the so-called [Black Protests](#). The protesters did not speak in the abstract language of human rights, as activists or academics often do. Strong emotions were included in their vocabulary and they talked about the specific effects of legislative proposals, about their experiences, their pain, fear, and suffering. We need a language that is strongly connected to our lived experience and conveys emotions that mobilize people.

Paradoxically, the attack on women’s and LGBTQ rights in Poland changed people’s attitude in the opposite direction from what ultraconservatives envisioned. There was a huge change in the attitudes of many people, especially among the younger generation during the last six years. For the younger generation, the issue of abortion is no longer a matter of compromise: 70 to 80 percent of young Poles are in favor of full legalization.

MAGDALENA DUŠKOVÁ | One of the texts from our project is devoted to the field of education and the impact of anti-gender on youth. Representatives of Czech anti-gender movements regularly visit schools and give lectures to young students. Usually, these lectures are in complete contradiction with modern sex education. Could you describe what such influencing of the youth looks like in Poland?

ELŻBIETA KOROLCZUK | In Poland, the government has very effectively managed to limit the access of civil society organizations, especially progressive civil society organizations, to schools and other educational spaces. The current education minister is an ultraconservative politician who openly presents his ideological agenda, on the basis of which he would like to remake the entire education system into a breeding ground for nationalists and devout Catholics.

In addition, there is also good cooperation between ultraconservative organizations and schools at the local level or in the online space. Such organizations receive millions from the state, in the form of various donations or specific programs. Progressive organizations, however, are cut off from any financial support from the state. Poland is an extreme case of what happens when you allow anti-gender organizations to dictate the rules of the game when it comes to working with the state.

ELIŠKA KOLDOVÁ | You have been researching anti-gender movements for a really long time. I’ve only been doing it for four months and I find it really exhausting. When my colleague and I confronted one of the main representatives of the Czech anti-gender several times, we agreed that we are actually afraid of her. Representatives of anti-gender movements can tell you to your face that Polish women are living well and are certainly not dying, while they calmly smile at you. Where do you get the courage and energy to continue your research and activism?

ELŻBIETA KOROLCZUK | I come from Białystok, a small town in northeastern Poland, which is very conservative and has a strong Catholic community. My mother and grandmother were strong believers. My mother even ran in the local elections for a right-wing nationalist, anti-European party in 2004. Despite that, we loved each other, and she was my big supporter when I started to engage in the women's movement. I think a lot of people who fall for anti-gender propaganda do so for a reason. They are, for example, strongly religious, afraid of a rapidly changing world in which they are forgotten, or socioeconomically disadvantaged. And suddenly anti-gender advocates point to the culprits of their problems and offer them hope for a better future.

I feel neither love nor hatred for politicians or representatives of anti-gender organizations. I am aware that their strategies and that their attitudes are often opportunistic — they themselves do not believe what they preach. They are cynical hypocrites. And we should constantly expose their hypocrisy and oppose their campaigns. However, we should not reject people who are subject to anti-gender propaganda, but rather think about how to make our country a space where there is a place for everyone. This is incredibly difficult when we are the ones whose rights are under threat and who are constantly being attacked. One is not born a woman, one becomes one. And in the same way, one is not born a fascist either, one becomes a fascist through the course of life.

Polarization is a two-player game. It's like dancing — it takes two to tango. Once we play the same game with fascists, we become part of the problem, not the solution. However, I understand that this attitude is definitely not an option for everyone. For me, as a cis heterosexual woman, for example, it is not as difficult to detach myself from homophobic attacks as it is for a queer person. I am not saying that we should accept our political adversaries as they are. But I think we should at least try to understand why they are so susceptible to anti-gender narratives.

MAGDALENA DUŠKOVÁ | You claim that we need feminist populism as a response to anti-gender. Can you explain what populist feminism means? And does it need to be anti-capitalist? I'm asking that second question because in the book you refer to the anti-capitalist manifesto [Feminism for the 99%](#), but you also disagree with its content in some way, if I'm not mistaken.

ELŻBIETA KOROLCZUK | In our thinking about feminist populism with Agnieszka Graff, we follow Chantal Mouffe, who speaks of populism as an ideology or a political style that is neither necessarily good nor bad. It takes different shapes and forms in different contexts. We are living in a crisis of the capitalist system and at the same time in a crisis of democracy, linked to questions of representation and power. The key question today is: Who are the people, who has a voice, legitimacy and who is truly represented?

When right-wing populists claim to be the voice of the people, it doesn't quite work for us on the Left to counter them through the language of the rule of law, talking about the Constitutional Tribunal and the stability of the judicial system. These are undoubtedly important aspects of democracy, but the conflict in today's politics lies elsewhere. Like Polish women, we must therefore say: we, women and minorities, are the people, and you anti-gender elites do not represent us. You are the corrupt elite. I am not suggesting that we should abandon the language of law or the language of human rights. We just need to charge it with conflict and emotions, we need to infuse it with meaning.

I find it absolutely bizarre that today's politicians, apart from the populist right, try to steer clear of emotions. Our life is about emotions, therefore politics is also about emotions. Affects are not contradictory to facts, they are intertwined. When politicians talk about access to abortion, they shouldn't talk about it as some abstract choice. They should talk about the real experiences of women who are forced to give birth to a child they don't want or can't afford to have. What kind of emotion is it? It's despair. It's torture. It's a horrible experience that no one should have to go through if we can prevent it. Progressive politics must consciously reflect our lived, bodily

experience, name the facts and connect them with emotional consequences.

ELIŠKA KOLDOVÁ | Many people in the Czech Republic think that Polish feminists failed in their efforts because of the ban on abortion there and that the fascists won over them. How do you see it?

ELŻBIETA KOROLCZUK | I teach a course on social movements at university. And this question comes up very often from students: Was the US civil rights movement successful? Yes, of course, it was extremely successful. They repealed Jim Crow laws and introduced legislation to end racial segregation in the key spheres of social life. Then the question usually comes: Was it a big success or a small success? And didn't they actually fail, considering that Martin Luther King Jr was killed, that the living conditions of many African Americans have not changed to this day, that police violence is so widespread? It was a success in many respects, but the process of change continues.

The same goes for Poland. The decision of the Constitutional Tribunal cut the access to legal abortion in the country. But it may have been a focal point of a much broader change, which will bring fruit in the future. Many people have changed their opinion on this issue. Sixty to 70 percent of the Polish population is in favor of some form of legalization of abortion, while before 2016 it was only 30 percent. The feminist movement became a mass movement. Unlike, for example, in Hungary, feminism in our country is not only centered in nongovernmental organizations and the bureaucratized sector — we have local mobilization, protest groups, a mass movement.

The Polish left-wing party also managed to reenter the parliament and we have several female MPs who openly support feminism and who are connected to activist circles. In the last year, the availability of abortions mediated by the Abortion Dream Team has also increased a lot, specifically last year they managed to help forty-four thousand Polish women. While the political sphere is becoming more and more conservative, society is becoming much more progressive.

I've been thinking a lot about hope lately and how we perceive it today. Hope has been privatized, thus we feel that good things have to come for us to feel hope. That we must achieve success that then will give us hope as individuals. But historically it has not been like this. The civil rights movement saw hope as the work that needs to be done collectively, rather than as a reaction to the outside world.

I wish we could re-politicize hope and not just take it as our individual reaction to the world outside, but rather a commitment to make the world a better place. Hope is our collective effort driven by a vision of a better world, and that's how we should begin to see it again.

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