



CONSERVATIVE CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS
(CSOs) AND ANTI-GENDER ISSUES IN CROATIA,
SLOVAKIA AND POLAND

HIRVATİSTAN, SLOVAKYA VE POLONYA'DA
MUHAFAZAKÂR SİVİL TOPLUM KURULUŞLARI VE
TOPLUMSAL CİNSİYET KARŞITLIĞI

Elif TEKTAŞ* & Asuman ÖZGÜR KEYSAN**

ABSTRACT

The anti-gender movement has been gaining prominence since the 2000s, supporting the idea that gender theory is wrong and unscientific. Conservative civil society organizations (CSOs) have played a leading role in promoting the ideas and demands of the movement. Recent studies have elaborated on the relationship between right-wing populism, Church and anti-gender movement; however, it is still significant to further the studies focussing on the involvement of conservative CSOs in the movement. To serve this aim, this paper will analyze the role of conservative CSOs in the anti-gender movement in Eastern Europe, with particular focus on three conservative groups in Croatia, Slovakia and Poland, providing a ground against gender equality politics. The online presence of three groups – “*Vigilare*”, “*Aliancia za rodinu*”, and *Centrum Wspierania Inicjatyw dla Życia i Rodziny*” will be investigated with thematic analysis. This study argues that contrary to the linear relationship between civil society and democratization established by the mainstream liberal view, conservative CSOs

* MSc Student, Middle East Technical University, Gender and Women's Studies, elif.tektas@metu.edu.tr, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9864-9710>.

** Dr., Part-time Lecturer, Middle East Technical University, Gender and Women's Studies, akeysan@metu.edu.tr, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5377-2114>.

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operating within anti-gender movements work to the detriment of democracy.

Keywords: Conservative Civil Society, Anti-Gender Movement, Conservative CSOs, Eastern Europe, Anti-Gender Discourse and Practices, Thematic Analysis.

ÖZ

Toplumsal cinsiyet teorisinin yanlış ve bilim dışı olduğu görüşünü destekleyen toplumsal cinsiyet karşıtı hareketler, 2000'li yıllardan bugüne dek önem kazanmaktadır. Muhafazakâr sivil toplum kuruluşları (STK), hareketin görüş ve taleplerini desteklemede öncü bir rol oynamaktadır. Son dönemde gerçekleştirilen birçok araştırma sağ popülizm, Kilise ve toplumsal cinsiyet karşıtı hareketler arasındaki ilişkiyi analiz etmektedir; fakat, muhafazakâr STK'ların hareket içindeki rolüne odaklanan çalışmaları ilerletmek hala önem teşkil etmektedir. Bu amaca hizmet etmeyi hedefleyen bu çalışma, Doğu Avrupa ülkelerindeki toplumsal cinsiyet karşıtı hareket içinde muhafazakâr STK'ların rolünü, özellikle Hırvatistan, Slovakya ve Polonya'da bulunan üç farklı STK'ya odaklanarak analiz edecektir. “*Vigilare*”, “*Aliancia za rodinu*”, and *Centrum Wspierania Inicjatyw dla Życia i Rodziny*” olmak üzere bu üç farklı STK'nın elektronik ortamda yer alan materyalleri tematik analiz yöntemiyle analiz edilecektir. Bu çalışma, sivil toplum ve demokratikleşme arasındaki ana akım liberal görüşün kurduğu doğrusal ilişkinin aksine, toplumsal cinsiyet karşıtı hareketler içinde faaliyet gösteren muhafazakâr STK'ların aslında demokrasinin aleyhine hareket ettiğini savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Muhafazakâr Sivil Toplum, Toplumsal Cinsiyet Karşıtı Hareketler, Sivil Toplum Örgütleri, Doğu Avrupa, Toplumsal Cinsiyet Karşıtı Söylem ve Pratikler, Tematik Analiz Yöntemi.

INTRODUCTION

The anti-gender movement has been gaining popularity around the world since the 2000s, with the primary targets of the movement being settled on gender

equality, and reproductive and LGBTQ+ rights (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017: 56). Over the last five years, the movement has gained prominence in such European countries as Italy, France, Ireland, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Croatia. The locally organized anti-gender movements in different countries have also begun to organize transnationally, bringing about dissemination of strategies, discourse and agency, such as mobilizations against “genderization”, “gender ideology” or the “gender lobby” (Graff and Korolczuk, 2017; Hodžić and Bijelić, 2014; Korolczuk, 2014; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017).

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have played an active role in campaigns, referendums and policy-making processes to promote the anti-gender movement demands (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Valkovičová and Hardoš, 2018; Vaggione, 2005). This paper will examine the role of conservative CSOs within the context of the anti-gender movement in Eastern Europe, focusing mainly on Croatia, Slovakia and Poland, which have been selected for this study due to the rise of the anti-gender movement in these countries. The Croatian Referendum on Same-sex Marriage in 2013, the Slovak Referendum on Family in 2015 and the efforts of Polish civil society organizations to halt changes in the sex education curriculum can be considered turning points in gender politics in those countries (Grzebalska, 2015; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018; Valkovičová and Hardoš, 2018). More concretely, these countries have embraced the power of religion, demographic concerns, conservatism and right-wing populism as a counterforce within gender politics and against the gender equality movements. The study will focus on the Croatian CSO “Vigilare”, Slovakian CSO “Alliance for Family” (*Aliancia za rodinu*) and Polish CSO “Centre for Initiatives for Life and Family (*Centrum Wspierania Inicjatyw dla Życia i Rodziny*)” and will be based on documentation related to their projects, campaigns and newsletters found on their websites.

Within the liberal approach to civil society, CSOs are a democratization tool that maintains a “vital role in the democratization process by bilateral and multilateral agencies” (Edwards and Hulme, 1996: 961). Drawing on the documentary data, however, this paper argues that the “anti-gender movement” challenges the role of CSOs in promoting democracy defined by the mainstream liberal view. In other words, CSOs may have anti-democratic and exclusionist features that adhere them to populist and conservative civil society. Their homophobic or xenophobic statements may exclude marginalized groups, and they may act against the attributed role of strengthening democracy and transforming society in a liberal way. Being agents of the complex hegemonic relationships between national and transnational politics, the economy and social movements, conservative CSOs that circulate and strengthen anti-gender sentiments foster populist tendencies and perpetuate the prevailing hegemony of the heteronormative values. Such CSOs tend to exclude marginalized groups

through right-wing populist discourse; thus, transforming civil society into an exclusionary area.

1. CONSERVATIVE CIVIL SOCIETY

With the changes in the notion of civil society that has emerged in the 21st century, civil society organizations have started to play a role in campaigns, lobbies and policy-making processes. For Kaldor (2003: 143), in the contemporary understanding of civil society, one can observe “a struggle for a new generation of rights, including gender, the environment, and peace, at global, national, and local levels”. Herein, one can see the emphasis on the idea that civil society is progressive in its struggle in contemporary issues and its challenges to emerging inequalities.

Considering these features of CSOs, there is a strong belief among their proponents that they are organizations for “doing good” (Fisher, 1997), idealizing CSOs as groups of people that “help others for reasons other than profit or politics” (Fisher, 1997: 442). In the civil society literature, there is a general liberal idea that CSOs take a mediating role in resolving political and social problems where “governments are unwilling to act, have withdrawn, or have failed” (Lang, 2013: 2). That said, there are opposing perspectives. In criticisms of CSO politics, some scholars argue against the role of CSOs in democratization and modernization efforts. While Beckman (1993), Edwards and Hulme (1996), Petras (1997) and Hemment (2004) highlight the problematic aspects of the operation of civil society and CSOs as a neoliberal project, other scholars, such as Young (2000), Philips (2002), Jad (2004) and Eto (2012), argue for diversity and inclusion in civil society and politics.

Going one step further, it is necessary to recognize the growing conservative tendencies in the site of civil society. Recently, conservative CSOs have gained power to transform civil society by becoming much more active in campaigns and policy-making processes. It is scholarly argued that there are particular characteristics that make civil society conservative. These features rest on the questions of which values are promoted, which identities are excluded and whether and how democratic norms are adopted. As the recent studies demonstrated, conservative civil society promotes “conservative social values, religious values, strong national identities, exclusionary ethnic identities, traditional or customary identities and institutional forms, illiberal political ideology, or a curtailment of liberal personal rights” (Youngs, 2018: 8). Yet, there is not a monolithic tool or way for mobilization of conservative civil society. Put it differently, conservative civil society has been put into practice in varying ways in different contexts. While some CSOs make an alliance with governments or other organizations as partners, some CSOs disassociate themselves from

governments and partners. Some CSOs might choose to be mainstream and not to use extremist violence to mobilize, whereas some CSOs present themselves as radical and extremist (Youngs, 2018).

Notably, the most significant motive in the rising of conservative civil society is religious-nationalism (see Youngs, 2018). The recent studies pay attention to the rise of conservative civil organizations, which are faith-based and Catholic, in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in Croatia, Slovakia, and Poland. These CSOs are the most acknowledged ones by the government; thereby, they have involved the policy-making processes excessively (see Domaradzka 2015; Marczewski, 2018; Petričušić, 2018; Strečanský, 2015). Populism is another motive in the mobilization of conservative civil society, among other characteristics as highlighted above. Conservative CSOs resort to the distinction between us/them, as the very nature of populism, in their discourses and practices. They define “us” as moral and legitimate while identifying “them” with corrupt and jeopardous (Kourou, 2018; Arato and Cohen, 2019). By doing so, conservative CSOs posit their values and traditions as the dominant in the site of civil society; thus, they endanger the values and rights of the minorities. As an example, the Polish case demonstrates that “populist conservative CSOs not only benefit from a favourable political context but also aim to change the political playing field altogether” through employing “democratic institutions, procedures, and values—such as referenda, legislative proposals, and laws protecting freedom of speech and conscience—against democracy itself” (Marczewski, 2019: 56). Together with these, faith-based conservative CSOs have a close encounter with populist governments since “populist entrepreneurs utilize the theme of religion and religious identity in civil society, representing it politically remarkable to serve the structural needs of populist politics” (Arato and Cohen, 2019: 108).

Considering these debates on conservative civil society, the anti-gender movement related organizations can be grouped under the category of conservative CSOs since their agendas are based on conservative and religious values. Although they are not using extremist violence, their participation in the policy-making and legislation processes is based on excluding the minorities and marginalized groups in society. Moreover, although they do not call themselves anti-democratic, they cannot be denied that they are challenging the liberal democracy, values, and human rights. More concretely, the anti-gender related conservative CSOs advocate the traditional, national, and religious values against LGBTQ+ and women's rights, and minority rights. This raises the question of where to locate conservative CSOs in the anti-gender movement in the Eastern European countries. In other words, if civil society is perceived in liberal democracies as having democratizing factors, how can we explain the position of the conservative CSOs that are linked to the anti-gender movement, which has the

capacity to violate the very first principle of civil society politics by raising the threat of conservative society.

2. ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENT IN EUROPE

Theories on gender can be classified under varying approaches. Those theories basically propose the impossibility of the sexuality accepted as ‘natural’ and challenge the taken for granted and fixed categories of ‘woman’ and ‘man’. By interrogating the taken for granted nature of sex, gender, and sexuality concepts, they aim to reveal that sexual identities are shaped within varied positions in historical and cultural contexts (see Jagose, 1996). Therefore, it shows that gender and sexuality categories have been expanding since the last century, except normative sexualities. In this paper, we follow Butler’s understanding of gender which is described as “not a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time - an identity instituted through *a stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler, 1988: 519) among varied theoretical frameworks on gender. This approach enables us to reveal the construction that privileges heterosexuality through naturalization and reproduces normative relations between the genders. More concretely, this construction has an enormous impact on discriminations and challenges LGBTQ+ individuals and women have been facing.

The LGBTQ+ movement and the women’s liberation movement have had a profound influence on the political conjuncture around the world, however, an opposing anti-gender movement has recently emerged that employs the concept of “gender ideology” spread by the Church and conservative groups including CSOs, foundations, initiatives, and networks, and supports “gender order, family and sexuality” (Graff and Korolczuk, 2017; Grzebalska, Kováts, and Petó, 2017; Korolczuk, 2019; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). From this approach, gender is constructed as a “symbolic glue” that brings together different groups, such as “Christian Churches, orthodox Jews, fundamentalist Muslims, mainstream conservatives, far-right parties, fundamentalist groups, and in some countries, even football hooligans”, in opposition to the common enemy of gender (Kováts and Põim, 2015; Grzebalska, et al., 2017).

For one anti-gender related network of organizations in France, La Manif Pour Tous (2013: 17), “‘gender ideology’ is destructive, obscurantist, anti-social, anti-popular as much as it is anti-natural”. “Gender ideology” is considered as a new form of totalitarianism by proponents of the anti-gender movement. Gabriele Kuby, a pioneer of the movement in Germany, asserts that “totalitarianism has made a costume change and now it appears in the mantle of freedom, tolerance, justice, anti-discrimination and diversity – ideological backdrops that prove to be amputated, distorted terms” (cited in Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018). The

proponents of the movement in Europe associate “gender ideology” with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in terms of its destructive power, and its potential to destroy civilization and society (Bracke and Paternotte, 2016).

The anti-gender movement claims gender theory to be wrong and unscientific, proposing itself as truth against gender theory, and giving place to the ideas of medical experts and academicians. In this respect, opposition to the notion of gender emerges as one of the categories in which the main tenets of the anti-gender movement reside. To fight against the enemy they have identified, they use both religious and secular media to mobilize, with books, lectures, conferences, online courses and workshops guided by the Church and conservative academicians, medical experts and scientists (Bracke and Paternotte, 2016; Korolczuk, 2019; Valkovičová and Hardoš: 2018). This assertion is crucial as the movement presents itself as being based on a set of truths related to human nature and society. Furthermore, the concepts used by proponents of the anti-gender movement include such highly political notions as totalitarianism, justice and democracy. Thus, the movement has been fighting for the acceptance of the altered definitions of these terms in the political realm. That is to say, the movement influences knowledge, transnational and international politics, policy-making and the economy through such institutions as the Church, the state and schools.

The main ideas of the movement have been mobilized rapidly through public debates and the moral panic triggered by the movement, whose arguments have been in harmony with the agendas of the Church and governments. The religion-based endorsement of the anti-gender movement and its effect on public opinion has been widely observed. The Catholic Church has labelled gender theory as a “Trojan horse” that seeks to establish an ideology based on a “denial of the sexes” and the “natural” differences between men and women (Bellè and Poggio, 2018: 124). In 2016, Pope Francis introduced “‘gender ideology’ as a dangerous imposition by wealthy Western countries” (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018: 797).

The agendas of governments and political parties often coincide with the demands of the anti-gender movement, including their strong stances against same-sex marriage, women’s reproductive rights, sex education in school, and the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence – known as Istanbul Convention.¹ In Croatia, Slovakia and Poland, the countries in our sampling, give no place to the concept of gender in their political agenda in any liberating or inclusive way; instead, they are conceiving this term as a threat. For example, gender is addressed under the

¹ The Convention is based on the understanding that “violence against women is a form of gender-based violence committed against women because they are women” (Council of Europe, 2011).

“protection of traditional values, stopping homo propaganda and gender ideology” in the manifesto of the National Movement party in Poland (Grzebalska, 2015: 88). As a further example of how some approach gender in Polish politics, Minister of Justice Jaroslaw Gowin, speaking out against the Istanbul Convention in 2012, referred to the Convention as a “carrier of gender ideology”, suggesting a hidden agenda to dismantle traditional families and local cultural values (Graff and Korolczuk, 2017: 29). Similar ideas can be found in the Hungarian context, where Minister of State for Family and Youth Affairs Katalin Novak asserted that “Hungary supports the generally accepted human rights norms – but give us the liberty to define family and the relationship between women and men in the way we want” (Corredor, 2019: 627). Similarly, each of the countries in our sampling has sought to play down the idea of gender issues and gender equality imposed by the European Union (EU), arguing that they are defending their cultural and national values against the threat of cultural degeneration.

Studies in the literature on the anti-gender movement indicate that abortion, same-sex marriage, sex education, reproductive rights and the gender-based statements in the Istanbul Convention are the critical issues raised in the movement’ agenda (see Kuhar and Zobec, 2017; Valkovičová and Hardoš, 2018; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018; Darakchi, 2019; Vida, 2019). While Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) and Paternotte and Kuhar, (2018) analyze transnational ties and the mobilization of the anti-gender movement in Europe, there are other scholars have focused on the movement's particular demands. For instance, Kuhar and Zobec's study (2017) discusses sex education in public schools and the opposition of the anti-gender movement. The study also addresses the Church’s point of view on gender theory and how the Church and the movement work in cooperation against the provision of sex education in school. Darakchi’s study (2019) breaks down the debates on the Istanbul Convention by interrelating nationalism and heteronormativity in the Bulgarian context. Vida (2019), on the other hand, focuses on reproductive rights and the banning of abortion, the EU’s position against these, and the future implications of the ban on women and LGBTQ+ in the Hungarian context, while Valkovičová and Hardoš (2018) analyze the rhetoric of the movement and the contributions of the Slovak CO, Alliance for Family to the case of Slovak Referendum.

Grzebalska, et al. (2017), Korolczuk (2014) and Kováts (2017) detail the mobilization of the movement within the illiberal transformation in Poland and Hungary, while Paternotte and Kuhar (2018), Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) Grzebalska and Pető (2017), and Graff and Korolczuk’s works (2017, 2018) clarify the illiberal transformation of civil society in Poland and Hungary through the appropriation of key concepts, tools and funding channels of liberal equality

politics, and these funding channels are provided by right-wing, Catholic organizations to the anti-gender movement in the contexts of Russia, China and the United States. In the same vein, Datta (2018)'s study clarifies the organizational role of Tradition, Family and Property (TFP), which is "the transnational, conservative and Catholic network, and politically active social movement", transnational ties between TFP and Ordo Juris (Poland), Vigilare (Croatia) and SPTK (Sihtasutus Perekonna ja Traditsiooni Kaitseks - Estonia). This study illuminates the TFP's leading role in the anti-gender movement and highlights the conservationist organisations' position, especially in the policy-making processes of sexual and reproductive rights through "social mobilization, norm entrepreneur, and infiltrating decision-making spaces". All of these studies serve to illuminate the relationship between right-wing populism, the Church and the anti-gender movement, and position of the anti-gender movement as a threat to women and LGBTQ+ rights. They also reveal the status of right-wing, Catholic and Conservationist organizations in the anti-gender movement. However, it is still significant to further the studies focussing on the involvement of conservative CSOs in the movement. Thus, the present study intends to elaborate on the role of these groups in circulating and fostering anti-gender issues in the Eastern European context, looking through the lens of conservative civil society literature.

3. METHOD AND SAMPLING

This study employs a thematic analysis approach, a "foundational method for qualitative analysis" (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 78). A thematic analysis approach can help "identify, analyze and report patterns within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 80). In the present study, a thematic analysis will help reveal the position of conservative CSOs in the anti-gender movement and how these groups frame the anti-gender issues in the Eastern European context. After relating the themes with the activities and discourses of the conservative CSOs in our sampling, the study will show how the activities of them fall in line with the targets of the anti-gender movement, and with the political and religious actors in the Eastern European countries. To this end, an analysis will be made of the content of their websites, as one of the key platforms used by these groups to reach the public.

The study will focus on conservative CSOs in Croatia, Slovakia and Poland, where the anti-gender movement is strong and enjoys support both from the government and religious actors. Within state socialism, CSOs fall under socialist state control as "umbrella organizations" (Einhorn, 2003:168). In this regard, they are not separate from the socialist state. However, the notion of civil society in the countries in our sampling was fostered after the dissolution of the Soviet Bloc. The official reason for the Western interventions in these countries was to ensure the creation and promotion of civil society, and as a result of these interventions in

the form of funding, a boom in the establishment of NGOs was seen (Einhorn, 2003; Doerfel and Taylor, 2004; Ghodsee, 2011). Advocates of the anti-gender movement are utterly “critical of existing civil society structures” in CEE countries (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018: 808), seeing them as a threat to the family structure, as well as national heritage and culture.

It should be noted that the salient proportion in the civil society arena in these three countries has been embraced by the Catholic Church (Domaradzka 2015; Strečanský, 2015; Petričušić, 2018). Within these countries, three conservative groups “Vigilare”, “Alliance for Family (*Aliancia za rodinu*)” and the “Center for Initiatives for Life and Family (*Centrum Wspierania Inicjatyw dla Życia i Rodziny*)” have been selected for this study due to their leading position in the anti-gender movement and their influence in (re)shaping the agenda and policy-making on anti-gender issues. “Vigilare” was founded in 2008 as a foundation in Croatia to safeguard Croatian cultural tradition threatened by heterosexual marriage and abortion (Hodžić and Štulhofer, 2017: 64). “Vigilare Foundation, one of the most powerful players in an increasingly powerful conservative movement in Croatia, was in fact co-founded in July 2016 by the Father Piotr Skarga Association for Christian Culture, an ultra-conservative Catholic organization in Poland” (Brakus, 2018). Later than Vigilare, both the Polish foundation Center for Initiatives for Life and Family and Slovak initiative Alliance for Family were established in 2013.

All of these groups in the sampling defend their national culture and adopt the ideals of the Catholic Church. Vigilare defines its mission and vision as “promoting marriage as a community of life of man and woman, promoting conservative social values and culture of life, promoting and defending the right to life from natural conception to natural death, promoting and advocating for the protection of the rights of the child against all forms of violence, in particular paedophilia and various forms of pornography” (Vigilare, no date). The motto of Slovak initiative, Alliance for Family, established as a network of organizations and individuals, is that “marriage and the family should be strengthened with the influence of civil society, churches, families, and state” (Aliancia Za Rodinu, no date). The mission, of Center for Initiatives for Life and Family, having the legal status of foundation, sets on the idea that “every human being has the right to life from conception to natural death” and defines marriage as a unity “between a man and a woman on the basis for the proper functioning of society” by referring to Popes John Paul II and Benedict XV. Their slogan is “for the family, for life” (CZIR, no date).

These three groups' main intention is to be active in policy- and decision-making processes in issues related to family, children, education, and the preservation of the national culture. In this regard, all have religious and

conservative backgrounds. In order to achieve their targeted goals, the Croatian and Slovak conservative groups have taken part in family referendum campaigns. Although their interventions into policy-making processes differ occasionally, all three groups conduct e-petitions, congress and meetings, both locally and internationally, make solidarity visits to other local and international organizations, propose alternative bills and programs to the government, organize family marches, and conduct campaigns against same-sex marriage, sex education in school, abortion and reproductive rights and the Istanbul Convention to influence public opinion at a national and international level. The congress and meetings' topics are strengthening the traditional family, the institution of marriage and European demographics, raising children following traditional values and ending sex education in schools. They have attracted a wide variety of speakers, including academicians, psychologists, lawyers, local government officials, clergy members, and heads of family national and international organizations.

The Croatian Vigilare CO has organized and attended such congresses and meetings as TradFest², KULFest, and a conference on "Conservatism in Europe: Perspectives and Challenges". Similarly, Alliance for Family is one of the partners and co-organizers of the Za Jazerom festival, held since 2015 with a conservative Slovak family participant profile (Za Jazerom, 2018). In the same vein in Poland, the CZIR organizes and attends congress and meetings such as the "Congress of Life and Family", focussing on the gender ideology, sex education in schools and the Istanbul Convention (CZIR, 2017a). Representatives from the CSOs in Poland and Croatia attended the meeting organized by CZIR in 2016, during which the representatives shared their experiences and efforts to strengthen the traditional family as well as conservatism and moral values in Europe (CZIR, 2016c). Thus, these congress and meetings serve not only for the dissemination of ideas and the expansion of networks, but also the development of transnational ties with other advocates of the anti-gender movement.

The conservative CSOs' documentations accessed for the study include project reports, congresses, e-petitions, campaigns, leaflets and newsletters, all of which were accessed from the CSOs' websites, and Internet sources containing their opinions and activities. The documents analyzed thematically in this study were from between June 2013 and August 2020, being a period in which the anti-gender movement was witnessing a rise in popularity in parallel with the conservative CSOs' operations, and when all three groups were active and recording successes.

² TradFest, organized annually since 2016, aims to promote the re-establishment of traditional and conservative values in Croatia and around the world, to create a mature society through the re-integration of its rich Christian heritage and culture (TradFest, 2018).

4. CONSERVATIVE CSOs’ ROLE IN FOSTERING ANTI-GENDER DISCOURSES AND PRACTICES

In this section, we analyze the discourses related to the anti-gender movement and the CSOs' activities at an organizational level to reveal the main threads of their doctrines. Based on the documentation of three conservative CSOs, we argue that same-sex marriage and adoption, sex education in schools, abortion and the reproductive rights, and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention are the four main topics addressed by them. We scaled the engagement level of each CSO with the four themes as “low”, “medium” and “high” according to the priority they give to the topics in the CSO’s official website.

Table.1: CSOs’ Engagement Levels with Anti-gender Topics

Organizations	Same-sex Marriage and Adoption	Sex Education in School	Abortion and Women’s Reproductive Rights	Ratification of the Istanbul Convention
Vigilare (Croatia)	High Engagement	Low Engagement	Low Engagement	Medium Engagement
Alliance for Family (Slovakia)	High Engagement	Low Engagement	Low Engagement	Medium Engagement
Center for Initiatives for life ad Family (Poland)	Medium Engagement	High Engagement	High Engagement	Medium Engagement

Same-Sex Marriage and Adoption

Same-sex marriage and adoption are the most controversial issues for the CSOs in our sampling. Their positions against same-sex marriage and adoption are legitimized through their desire to preserve and defend the traditional family, which is heterosexual, monogamous, and pursuant to procreation. All three CSOs have defined marriage as “a community of life of man and woman and the meaning of family as a fundamental part of the society in which children are raised” on their websites (Vigilare, no date; Aliancia Za Rodinu, no date; CZIR, no date). Thus, for the CSOs, there is no place for same-sex marriage and adoption.

The homosexual relationship has been legally recognized in Croatia since 2003 when the Same-Sex Unions Act gave same-sex couples the right to have joint property and be supported by a partner. However, the Act does not provide same-sex partners with the marriage or conjugal rights enjoyed by opposite-sex partners through the institution of marriage and common-law marriage (Juras, 2004). Regardless, discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and sexual

identity has been an ongoing issue in Croatia, including initiatives to push for a constitutional referendum proclaiming, “marriage is only a community of women and men” (Vigilare, 2013a), and Croatian CSO Vigilare supported this with a petition requesting a constitutional referendum³ in June 2013 (Vigilare, 2013b). Subsequently, in 2014, the Law on Life Partnerships of Persons of the Same-Sex was passed. According to this law, if both partners are of the same gender, at least 18 years old and consent to form a partnership, they are granted the same rights and responsibilities available to opposite-sex partners (Zakon Croatia Republic, 2014). The law, however, does not give adoption rights to same-sex partners. In 2015, Vigilare launched a petition in opposition to the changes in the law addressing to the President of the Croatian Republic, the Speaker and the Prime Minister (Vigilare, 2015). In line with Vigilare’s approach, Prime Minister Milanović announced that the law would not threaten the constitutional meaning of marriage, yet the adoption rights of same-sex couples are still high on the agenda of Vigilare.

In 2018, Vigilare, published an article about the rights of “children’ to have heterosexual parents” on their website, taken from the German Institute of Youth and Society, and listing ten reasons why children need heterosexual parents countenance to the existing gender roles in society. They asserted that growing up in a homosexual family is a fundamental violation of children's rights (Vigilare, 2018a). Vigilare (2018b) has also spoken out in opposition to the Foster Care Act changes, under which same-sex couples can act as foster families. Although the court allowed a gay couple to become a foster family in 2019 (Janjevic, 2019), the Zagreb Social Welfare Centre – one of the governmental institutions responsible for the administration of social welfare and child welfare systems – refused to implement the court's decision in 2020 (Stilin, 2020). Vigilare (2020a) responded to the news by publishing a letter addressed to the Zagreb Social Welfare Centre thanking them for rejecting the application. The Croatian CSO declared that they agreed with this decision, referring to it as being in children's interest. In February 2020, Vigilare (2020b) published a newsletter in response to the Constitutional Court of Croatia's actions, asserting that the court’s decision on the Foster Care Act was a violation of constitutional law and against “family and moral values in Croatia”.

Similarly, in Slovakia, several bills were introduced related to recognising same-sex partnerships (in 1997, 2000, 2012 and 2018), but none were successful. Established in opposition to attempts to legalize same-sex marriage in Slovakia,

³ In December 2013, a constitutional referendum was held in Croatia, with 65 per cent of those who voted to respond "yes" to the question: “Are you in favour of inserting into the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia a provision whereby marriage is the lifeblood of a woman and a man?” (Associated Press in Zagreb, 2013), which led eventually to a constitutional prohibition on same-sex marriages.

the CSO “Alliance for Family”, modelled on the CSOs in Croatia, organized many referendum campaigns. In 2014, the Slovak CSO initiated a referendum campaign opposing same-sex marriage and adoption and giving families the right to exclude their children from sex education (Aliancia Za Rodinu, 2016a). The Alliance for Family referendum failed; however, as only 21.41 per cent of the necessary 50 per cent of the electorate required for the Referendum to be valid cast votes.⁴

As distinct from *Vigilare*, the Slovak CSO took a step forward on same-sex partnership, and explicitly targeted the EU’s legislation on same-sex marriage⁵ and the term of ‘gender’ in official documents and international agreements. To illustrate, they launched a petition addressed to the Government of the Slovak Republic calling for withdrawal from the UN’s Registered Partnership due to its acceptance of “same-sex partnerships” and its use of the term “gender” in official documents (Aliancia Za Rodinu, 2016b). Going against the EU’s demands, in May 2018, Alliance for Family initiated a project entitled “Do Not Tear the EU!” calling for solidarity with other CSOs and initiatives in their acts against same-sex marriage and partnerships, with the justification that these acts represent an intervention of EU legislation into Slovakian politics. In the letter to the EU, they stated that “we, the undersigned organizations send out the clear message that, if the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) adopts the Opinion of the Advocate General and the position of the European Commission, by which ‘spouses’ includes ‘same-sex spouses’ as an autonomous definition, national marital legislation will be severely undermined”, and they defined this legislation as an “ideological colonization” (Aliancia Za Rodinu, 2016c). To this end, Alliance for Family lobbied to get accepted the demands of the anti-gender movement in the EU countries and endeavoured to take a leading role in policy making, at both local and international levels.

Considering the number of referendums and petitions launched, the Croatian and Slovakian CSOs can be seen as actively opposed to same sex marriage than those in Poland. Nevertheless, the Polish CSO, the Centre for Initiatives for Life and Family (CZIR), have also organized campaigns on same-sex marriage and adoption with a similar motivation. In 2015, they launched a petition to block the recognition of foreign gay partnerships as marriages, and to prevent such partners from being treated as spouses (CZIR, 2015a). Differently

⁴ The first question of Referendum was about the marriage ban, and %94.50 of eligible voters voted for yes. The second question was about the adoption ban for same-sex couples, and %92.43 of eligible voters voted yes. The third question was about sex education choice, and %90.32 of eligible voters voted for yes (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2015).

⁵ The EU can be seen as a driving force against the conservative and exclusionary implementations, with the European Court of Justice (2018) ruling that “EU member states must grant married same-sex couples, where at least one partner is an EU citizen, full residency rights”.

from the Croatian and Slovakian CSOs, CZIR deliberately targeted the rights to gender recognition of individuals to preserve traditional 'sex roles' and 'family' in their terms. In July 2015, a bill on “gender recognition”, asserting that no surgery was needed for gender transition, and that two medical reports would be sufficient, was proposed. The CZIR immediately launched a petition to counter the bill, claiming that it violated “the true nature of man and woman”, and could lead to marriages between homosexuals after one had reassigned their sex (CZIR, 2015b). It can be understood from this Act of the Polish CSO that any act on behalf of LGBTQ+ individuals was considered as a threat to the traditional family. While Sjem adopted the bill in August 2015, Polish President Andrzej Duda vetoed the Gender Recognition Act.⁶ In October 2015 the bill was never enacted (Towle, 2015).

Overall, all three CSOs are falling to the same place with anti-gender movement demands on defending traditional family. Furthermore, they are actively taking place in the policy-making process in same-sex marriage, civil partnership, and same-sex couples' right to adoption; however, their level of engagement may differ. Vigilare and Alliance for Family are very active in referendum campaigns as an intervention to marriage equality than CZIR as seen in Table 1.

Sex Education in Schools

Similar to the standpoint regarding “same-sex marriage and adoption”, the groups' representatives' main line of opposition to the idea of sex education in schools is that sex education can lead children to homosexuality. From a conservative perspective, sex education based on gender equality may be confusing for children and may affect their sexuality. They have also argued that sex education may arouse pupils' curiosity, leading to an increase in teenage pregnancies (Kuhar and Zobec, 2017). Similar to this perspective, the conservative CSOs oppose sex education in schools supporting family-friendly schooling; even they use different tools to achieve these aims.

Between 2008 and 2012, the Croatian foundation Vigilare ran campaigns in the media to protect children from sexuality, and opposing abortion, reproduction technologies and Christianophobia. In 2012, however, sex education in schools was moved to the top of the agenda. Thus Vigilare and *U ime obitelji (In the Name of Family)* began engaging in national initiatives through a campaign entitled “Stay Away from their Childhood”, which argued that sex education in schools would

⁶ The Gender Accordance Act was approved by the Lower chamber of the Polish Parliament (Sjem) in July 2015. Although the Polish Senate adopted the Act in August 2015, Polish President Andrzej Duda vetoed the Gender Accordance Act. The Act was returned to the Sjem, but remained as annulled since no majority (3/5) could be reached.

sexualize children and lead them toward homosexuality (Hodžić and Štulhofer, 2017: 62). Similarly, Alliance for Family showed an opposing position to sex education in school through putting the question of “Do you agree that schools should not require children to participate in classes on sexual behaviour or euthanasia if their parents or children themselves disagree with the content of the teaching?” to the referendum in 2015. Still, the referendum failed due to a lack of response (Aliancia za Rodinu, 2016a).

Like Vigilare, the CZIR in Poland held a demonstration with 26 other organizations and networks seeking to halt any changes to the sex education curriculum in 2015. As seen in Table 1, distinctly from the Croatian and Slovakian case, Polish foundation CZIR put fighting against sex education in schools as a priority and actively acts upon curriculum in schools. In 2015, the CZIR launched a project entitled “Family Friendly School”, which aimed to strengthen moral and traditional values in education (CZIR, 2015c), but before launching the project, the CZIR (2015d) collected around 20,000 signatures in support of the program. Consequently, they succeeded in their campaign, and several Polish kindergartens and schools have held anti-gender certificates since 2015, reaching 187 in number, although this number is still growing (Grzebalska, 2015.) In 2019, the CZIR launched a call for action with the title “Protect our children from LGBTQ+ propaganda in schools” at the Warsaw City Hall (CZIR, 2019a). In 2019, CZIR, together with the Ordo Iuris– a legal organization that has taken part as a third party in Polish and international courts and policy making processes – sent an e-petition to the Minister of National Education, Dariusz Piontkowski, calling for a draft amendment to the Education Law related to the banning of sex education in schools. Their demands were the same including “halting sex education and LGBTQ+ propaganda in schools” and “strengthening the traditional family through a school program” (CZIR, 2019b). Poland's debate is active, with the Polish government siding with the CZIR and Ordo Iuris Institute.

Abortion and Women’s Reproductive Rights

Women's reproductive rights, particularly abortion, are other controversial issues that the conservative CSOs in our sampling take an interest. Their main focus is *fetal rights* and they are against abortion challenging traditional family values.

Since 2013, Vigilare in Croatia has been campaigning against the Abortion Law, allowing abortion up to 10 weeks. In April 2020, Vigilare published an article in response to the World Health Organization (WHO)’s statement asserting that ensuring access to abortion and the safety of abortion are of paramount importance during the coronavirus pandemic, which Vigilare claimed was shameful and unacceptable. The CSO claims that it is “spread the culture of death”

(Vigilare, 2020c). Vigilare has since been campaigning to ensure politicians commit fully to the abortion ban (Vigilare, 2020d).

Beyond the campaigns for an abortion ban, Slovakian organization Alliance for Family campaigned for a bill “*giving women the right*” to see their unborn child and hear its heartbeat before going ahead with an abortion (Aliancia Za Rodinu, 2019). Furthermore, in February 2020, the same organization organized the “I Choose to Live” Internet campaign against the Abortion Law, which permits abortion upon request until the 12th week of pregnancy, and for medical reasons after that (Aliancia Za Rodinu, 2020a). Although anti-abortion campaigns have gained broad public support, the law has not been changed, and regressive bills on abortion law remain as a controversial issue with advocates of abortion on one side, and conservative Christian political parties and conservative CSOs on the other (Sirotnikova, 2020).

Among the other CSOs, the Polish CZIR has been much more active in its anti-abortion activities and women’s reproduction rights, placing it at the top of its agenda as a highly controversial issue in the country since 1989 (See Table 1). Abortion had been legal in Poland since 1956 but was banned in 1989 following the collapse of the communist regime. In 2016, the Polish government attempted to place a full ban on abortion, threatening both those aborted their children and the doctors carrying out such operations with imprisonment (Roache, 2019). In 2016, the CZIR, in cooperation with the Ordo Iuris Institute, launched a “Stop Abortions” campaign in which assistance was provided to “women and families instead of abortion” (CZIR, 2016a). The CZIR organized a press briefing to promote the campaign and to provide details of the civil project, which included: “support of perinatal hospices; the provision of benefits to the parents of disabled children that would allow them to stay in work; psychological help and support services; faster adoptions of children conceived as a result of rape or disabled children; the establishment of intervention adoption centres; and Reform of single-parent homes” (CZIR, 2016b). The CSO also immediately reacts to any media channels that voice any kind of support to abortion.⁷

Unlike the Croatian and Slovak CSOs, the CZIR in Poland is actively opposed to all kinds of reproduction technology, such as contraception and artificial insemination. For instance, after the Senate of the Republic of Poland voted on the Artificial Insemination Act in July 2015, the CZIR (2015e) immediately called on their supporters to call and send emails to senators, and to

⁷ For instance, in 2018, a Polish newspaper, *Wyborcza*, published an article entitled “Abortion is OK”, to which the CZIR and Ordo Iuris Institute immediately responded with an e-petition, submitted to the Media Ethics Council, asserting that the article violated journalistic ethics. The CSO accused the Polish newspaper of promoting crime and providing manipulated survey data (CZIR, 2018).

visit senatorial offices to convince their representatives not to vote for this bill, asserting that would pave the way for same-sex couples to have children. Subsequently, the Act was approved by the Polish Senate, but prohibited for same-sex couples. Moreover, in 2015, the CZIR launched a campaign against a regulation allowing the non-prescription EllaOne drug's purchase – the so-called emergency contraception – working with other organizations to collect over 170,000 signatures of people opposed to the new regulation (CZIR, 2015f). Besides, working with MP Tadeusz Woźniak, the deputy chairman of the Parliamentary Group for the Protection of Life and Family, the Institute for Legal Culture Ordo Iuris; the Pro Right to Life Foundation; the Ordo Caritatis Institute; and CitizenGo, the CZIR organized a press-conference during which they spoke out against this regulation (CZIR, 2015g). Following these interventions, the Polish government approved changes to the prescription status of EllaOne, which has been available only through prescription since 2017. This can be seen as an outcome of the CSOs efforts to cooperate to develop hegemonic power to back efforts aimed at meeting the anti-gender movement's demands.

Ratification of the Istanbul Convention

The conservative CSOs in our sampling show opposition to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, which they believe its fundamental aim is to promote gender ideology and gender mainstreaming by paving the way for recognition to other gender identities such as transgender and disrupting the traditional understanding of womanhood and manhood. Thus, it would not be effective in preventing violence against women. Instead, they claim that the Istanbul Convention would violate the gender roles by muddling a husband and a wife at domestic life, which would lead to destroy the family structure and be harmful to the next generations.

In the Croatian context, the government ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2018, to which Vigilare responded by organizing Anti-Istanbul Convention campaigns. Following the Bulgarian Parliament's rejection of the Istanbul Convention, Vigilare (2018c) sent the Bulgarian government congratulations, called on the Croatian government to follow suit, and declined to ratify the "Istanbul Convention" in the country. In his opening speech at TradFest 2018, Batarelo, the President of Croatian CSO Vigilare, defined the Istanbul Convention as unnecessary and ultracontroversial. He also claimed that more than 30,000 people were on the street during the protests against to ratification of the Istanbul Convention (Vigilare, 2018d). The Alliance for Family, on the other hand, launched an e-petition in 2019 with the heading "Do not Traumatise Slovakia with the Istanbul Convention", seeking to convince the government to pull out. In the open letter, Chromík, the CSO's Chairman, proposed that the Istanbul

Convention labels men as rapists and violent and adopts a misguided ideology of the power struggle between men and women (Aliancia Za Rodinu, 2020b).

Poland signed the Convention in 2012, and with the announcement of a vote on Poland's adoption of the Istanbul Convention in 2014, the CZIR immediately launched a campaign to oppose it. After Parliament ratified the Convention in 2015, the Polish CSO launched an e-petition calling on the President to veto the decision (CitizenGo, 2015). It is suggested that the Convention would lead to the legalization of same-sex marriage, would weaken the family structure rather than strengthen it, would not resolve the issue of violence against women, and would lead to the legalization and spread of abortion (CZIR, 2014). In his speech, Kwaśniak, the President of the CZIR, stated at the 4th Congress of Life and Family, "We cannot stand aside and wait for the dangerous, Western trends to pour into Poland in a broad stream, and to break up families and deconstruct society even more" (CZIR, 2017a). In July 2020, the Polish Ministry of Justice announced Poland's withdrawal from the Convention, indicating an alignment of the ideologies of the CZIR and the Polish government. Although no direct relationship exists between them, it can be seen that the CZIR supports the Polish government in the shaping of public opinion.

5. ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENT-RELATED ORGANIZATIONS' RELATIONSHIP WITH ACTORS IN THE FIELD

Three conservative organizations featured here have common motivations, including Catholic and conservative values, and opposition to the gender equality policies of the EU, and they all make use of similar expressions, logos and rhetoric to achieve their objectives. Furthermore, their campaigns, protests and marches are all focused on the notion that the LGBTQ+ and women's liberation movements constitute a threat to their culture and society as a whole. Graff (2014: 434) suggests that the anti-gender movement gained strength due to the instability of democracy, resentment and economic crises, the weaknesses of the LGBTQ+ and women's movements, and the power of nationalism in CEE countries.

The Catholic Church is one of the main actors working in cooperation with these organizations. Vigilare is a branch of TFP (Tradition, Family and Property), an organization of the transnational, conservative and Catholic network aiming to promulgate Catholic values and anti-gender demands in Croatia. Similar to Croatian case, as it can be seen in the previous part, CZIR has been in enormous campaigns with Ordo Iuris, which is a branch of TFP in Poland. Besides, in 2017, the CZIR in Poland met with a delegation from the Knights of Columbus Order, which is the world's largest fraternal Catholic family organization (CZIR, 2017b). The Alliance for Family in Slovakia claims to work independently of any ideology, religion or political party, although four Churches in Slovakia declared their

support to the Alliance for Family in the referendum campaign of 2014 (Aliancia Za Rodinu, 2014). At that time, the Pope Francis's said, "I greet the pilgrims from Slovakia, and through them, I wish to express my appreciation of the entire Slovak Church, and their encouragement to continue their efforts in defence of the family, as a vital cell of society" referencing the Slovak referendum (HRW, 2015). With the conspicuous impact of Catholic Church, these conservative CSOs have established the transnational ties among them in order to spread their conservative values, which fit in the anti-gender movement's demands, and gain power in the politics and civil society arena.

Some scholars have defined the "gender ideology", which was proposed by Church, as "symbolic glue" (Kováts and Pöim, 2015; Grzebalska, et al., 2017). Various social groups have been united in opposing gender equality, and they are mobilizing against women's rights through populism, which is encompassing "symbolic unification". In that way, it establishes a "broader social subjectivity" which manifests itself as majority or a "popular identity" (Laclau, 2005:74). Furthermore, the populist rhetoric depends on "us" and "them" distinction. Here, "us" represents homogenous groups with no gender, ethnicity or class differences, and "them" the groups with specific interests. According to the perspective of "us", seeking to gain privileges in society may be detrimental to the rest of the population. In this regard, the conservative CSOs manifest their values under the threat of cultural degeneration due to "gender" and affiliate against minorities, which are labelled as a threat to conservative and traditional values. In his opening speech at TradFest 2018, Batarelo, the President of Croatian CSO Vigilare, dwelled upon traditional, conservative, Christian-Catholic views, focussing on the foundations of the Western Christian civilization to which Croatia belongs (Vigilare, 2018d). Batarelo also highlighted the independence of Croatia and the fall of communism; the violent, unnecessary and controversial nature of the Istanbul Convention; and abortion, and introduced Croatia proudly as "a Christian, Catholic, Conservative and traditional country" (Vigilare, 2018d). In our case, such discourse of populism align with the faith-based conservatism has a power of transforming civil society, leading to marginalization of the LGBTQ+ and feminist segments of society. The statements of political leaders are based on right-wing populist discourses, warning that the white national family is about to fall apart and is in need of saving if the reproduction of the white nation community is to be assured, and in this regard, minorities are excluded (Rodriguez, et al., 2018: 140). For this reason, the governments of Croatia, Slovakia, and Poland have strived to protect the traditional family, emphasising "demographic concerns", which is one of the reasons that these governments promote the anti-gender movement through CSOs.

Obviously, civil society is not a concept that can be considered independent of the state. Scholars, Strečanský (2015), Petričušić (2018), Youngs (2018), and Zihnioğlu (2018) remarked the intricate relationship between government and conservative CSOs and they are “reduced to the role of local government subcontractors” (Domaradzka, 2015: 121). Mudde (2003) asserts that for the politicization of civil society, political parties seek to exercise control over NGOs (p.155), and this can clearly be seen in the alliances between government, political parties and conservative CSOs. For instance, Alliance for Family (Slovakia) was one of the International Family Conference partners in 2015 that was organized by a Croatian conservative initiative with *U ime obitelji (In the Name of Family)* with the support of Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. Like the Slovak case, the Polish government organized a seminar under the banner “Family-based Policy and Family Culture – National and Local” in cooperation with other pro-family organizations, among which was the CZIR (CZIR, 2016d). In 2016, after signing a declaration on LGBTQ+ equality with other EU countries, Minister Wojciech Kaczmarczyk held a meeting with representatives of pro-family CSOs in Poland, including the CZIR. In this meeting, the President of the CZIR spoke not only in support of the Polish government in actions related to family rights, but also in terms of respecting, defending and promoting the Polish legal standards related to the protection of marriage, the family and children (CZIR, 2016e). The close relationship of the CSOs in our sampling with national governments illuminates conservative CSOs’ position in the local politics.

Whereas some civil society organizations have embraced the ideals of democracy, others have challenged the democratic ideas. Civil society is not “an unmitigated blessing for democracy” (Whitehead, 1997: 105), and this is revealed as both visible and factual in our case study. The Gramscian approach to political society refers to “the arena of coercion and domination”, while civil society refers to “consent and direction”, and in this regard, the aim of civil society is “to organize hegemony” (Kumar, 1993: 382). Thus, the anti-gender movement is hegemonic in a Gramscian sense since civil society is always under threat and pressure from multiple actors in those struggles of hegemony. CSOs in our study demonstrate that conservative CSOs are the important outcome of those hegemonic struggles among the Catholic Church and governments, while also being actors in these struggles. Activities of CSOs affect the redistribution of power; however, conservative CSOs are converting this redistribution process on behalf of the majority and dominant culture. Although their existence points out the political pluralism, their activities and mobilization are opposing plural society and differences. We are thus brought to a point where these conservative CSOs should be questioned in terms of their activities; as Beckman (1993: 30) indicated: “the freedoms of civil society are gained in struggles against inherited constraints, including feudal, patriarchal, religious and other restrictions. The freedom and

emancipation of subordinated social groups depend on the ability of the state to restrain the exercise of power in society, based on arms, property, gender, ethnicity, and other factors that discriminate between people in access to resources". However, as can be seen in the present study, the rights of some groups can be violated or ignored by the state with the justification that religious, cultural and national values are to be supported.

In summary, conservative CSOs that circulate and strengthen anti-gender sentiments foster populist tendencies and perpetuate the prevailing hegemony of the heteronormative values. To put it differently, such CSOs tend to exclude marginalized minorities through right-wing populist discourse, thus transforming civil society in an exclusionary way. Therefore, such conservative CSOs, from a mainstream liberal perspective, make no contribution to the steadily progressive role of democratization within civil society.

6. CONCLUSION

Drawing upon documentary data of the conservative CSOs in Croatia, Slovakia, and Poland, we analyzed whether and to what extent these groups have supported the anti-gender movement in Eastern Europe and assess the outcomes of such support. All three CSOs in our sampling have common goals: to defend their national cultures and family values and oppose same-sex education and the Istanbul Convention. It can be understood from the garnered data that although they have a common agenda, the Slovakian and Croatian conservative CSOs campaigned more against same-sex couples, while the Polish CSO has focused more on the laws related to reproductive rights, and especially abortion. Furthermore, while all three CSOs have targeted pre-college curriculums, Polish CSO actively lobbied and succeeded in changing the Polish government educational policy. Throughout the case study analysis, the links between the conservative organizations, the state, the Catholic Church, and transnational actors have been revealed. Drawing upon the themes emerging out of the CSOs' documentation, we argued that the CSOs—as parts and agents of the complex hegemonic relationships within national and transnational politics, religion, and social movements—may facilitate the conservatization of civil society through excluding marginalized groups; thus, turning civil society into an exclusionary area.

It is of deep concern that the anti-gender movement has gained strength in a short time and that conservative CSOs have played a vital role. Our analysis elaborates a comprehensive outlook on both the anti-gender movement's demands and its mobilization through organizations. In these regards, this study makes two main contributions to conservative civil society literature: first, with the rise of the anti-gender movement, gender has now become a key point of focus in

conservative civil society literature; second, anti-gender movements, by attacking gender, have become a key factor in the mobilization of a right-wing populist discourse against rights and freedoms, without resorting directly to the non-violent tools of civil society. In short, all of the CSOs in our sampling mobilized through non-violent means, such as congresses, polls, protests, petitions, workshops and festivals, and became important actors both in policy-making and the media.

As our case study demonstrates, the anti-gender movement is fundamentally against LGBTQ+ and women's rights, and so this movement and its demands need to be challenged. Transnational advocacy networks have offered vital space for both LGBTQ+ and feminist groups to develop their "support base, to expand their networks, and affect policy changes" (Corredor, 2019: 620), and these advocacy networks in time have become active in policy-making at a grassroots level, or institutionalized as a means of reducing inequalities by helping to develop social policies on behalf of marginalized and excluded groups. There are LGBTQ+ and feminist CSOs in the sample countries advocating for same-sex marriage, women's reproductive rights, and the Istanbul Convention, and their efforts have been essential for representation. As Butler (2004: 141) states, "those who gain representation, especially self-representation, have a better chance of being humanized, and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less human or not regarded at all". As our data reveal, it represents marginalized and excluded groups that the anti-gender movement, supported by the conservative CSOs, opposes. This heterosexist, conservative and exclusionary movement threatens the struggle for the necessary promotion and protection of identities. It contributes to the increasing homophobia and hate crimes committed against the LGBTQ+ individuals and the depenalization of domestic violence.

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