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Contentious gender politics in Italy and Croatia: diffusion of transnational anti-gender movements to national contexts

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary anti-gender movements mobilize against gender and sexual equality for which feminist and LGBTQI+ movements have been advocating for decades. We propose the term ‘contentious gender politics’ to capture this clash of opposing movements concerning bodily integrity, kinship structures, sexual morality, and institutionalization of gender equality. Existing literature has recognized the transnational character of anti-gender movements and identified matching tactics, frames, and allies across different countries. We examine how these transnational movements used similar campaigns to ‘localize’. Localization is conceptualized in this research as the process of adapting frames and tactics to different national contexts. To do so, this study examines the diffusion of social movements and anti-gender campaigns by comparing anti-gender movements in Italy and Croatia through critical events between 2013 and 2019. We demonstrate that the localization of these anti-gender movements occurred through a three-step pathway: first, by adapting frames and tactics of left-liberal civil society and progressive movements; second, by forging alliances with existing right-wing parties; and third, by embedding its agenda within formal political and administrative bodies.

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Introduction

In the years since France’s La Manif Pour Tous (The Rally for All) in 2012 and 2013, campaigns voicing opposition to same-sex marriage have emerged simultaneously across other European countries and around the world (see, Ahrens et al., 2018; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Roggeband & Krizsán, 2018; Verloo, 2018). These campaigns target ‘LGBT rights, reproductive rights, sex and gender education, gender studies, and democracy’ (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017, p. 168). The contemporary opposition to gender and sexual equality, to which the literature refers to as ‘anti-gender’ movements and campaigns (e.g. Juroš et al., 2020; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019), has been theorized as an intensified reaction to the feminist and LGBTQI+¹ movements in the last three decades. Chappell (2006, p. 493) identified ‘a very loosely structured transnational conservative patriarchal network’ that counters women’s rights activists

at UN human rights conferences since the early 2000s. This network gathers religiously motivated groups ‘under a rhetorical “pro-family” rubric’ to oppose the international efforts concerning the women’s rights agenda (*ibid.*).

We refer to the interactionist and antagonistic elements of the confrontations surrounding gender and sexual equality as ‘contentious gender politics’ which we define as the sustained claims making of movements representing opposing views in relation to the institutional organization and the discursive constitution of gender. These movements typically include, on the one side, anti-gender and religious-conservative organizations, and on the other side, feminist, LGBTQI+, and other progressive movements. Their representatives collide around the norms, legal availability, and the social acceptability of lived practices, such as: bodily integrity, kinship structures, sexual morality, and institutionalization of gender equality. Movements on both sides can be part of broader networks or coalitions, including formal political parties engaged in (anti)-feminist and (anti)-equality activities and policies aimed at influencing the policy-making process (Roggeband, 2018).

We consider anti-gender movements as transnational counter-movements that challenge gender equality at both local and international levels (Chappell, 2006; Corredor, 2019). In general, existing studies frame and document the anti-gender movement’s tactical strategies from an in-depth, case study perspective (e.g., Darakchi, 2019; Graff & Korolczuk, 2017; Mayer & Sauer, 2017; Stambolis-Ruhstorfer & Tricou, 2017; Villa, 2017), or by analyzing its prominent transnational aspects (e.g., Chappell, 2006; Corredor, 2019). However, comparative perspectives which emphasize the transnational specificities of the diffusion of anti-gender movements across national contexts remain undertheorized. Our systematic comparison of anti-gender movements in two different countries answers the call to ‘disentangle the various components of this phenomenon and locate them in concrete settings [...] to grasp the specificities of each project and the ways in which they interact with each other’ (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017, p. 14). Specifically, we examine how *localization* – that we define as a process through which anti-gender movements adapt transnationally coordinated frames, organizations, and tactics to meet the requirements of local discursive and political opportunity structures – unravels in two similar cases: namely, Italy and Croatia during the period 2013–2019. In doing so, we aim at singling out the diffusion mechanism through which a transnational movement is localized, that is successfully rescaled, adapted and embedded in the national context (Minami, 2019; Roggeband, 2007). In this respect, we highlight two key aspects, notably the employment of mirroring strategies (Ayoub & Chetaille, 2020) and the development of isomorphic tendencies (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). While the former describes the ‘process by which the movement sustains itself by adopting the symbols and imagery used by their opposition’ (Ayoub & Chetaille, 2020, p. 25), the latter refers to a process ‘when contending movements engage in the same venues over a prolonged period of time, they are likely to develop similar organizational forms so as to be “combat ready”’ (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, p. 1649).

We use a paired comparison and dual-process tracing method (Tarrow, 2010) in relation to major critical events (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996) to analyze the strategies, frames, and outcomes of the localized anti-gender movements. Our case selection is based on the initial similarities we find relevant for understanding contemporary opposition to gender equality. In the two countries concerned, right-wing parties

have overlapping framing and tactical repertoires which rose in popularity between 2013 and 2019. In addition, the Catholic Church played a political and cultural role in both countries. Whereas we observed a parallel rise in the anti-gender movements' popularity in the initial stages, we observe a sudden fall in popularity in the Croatian anti-gender movement, despite the government led by the right-wing party. The dual-process tracing method enables us to disentangle the interplay between the anti-gender movements' strategies and the local opportunities in both countries in order to uncover the factors of divergence in the anti-gender movement's path to localization.

The article is structured as follows. We present our conceptual framework, which links research on anti-gender movements and opposition to gender equality with theoretical advancements on social movements diffusion processes and transnationalization mechanisms. We then lay out the tracing of critical events using our paired comparison methodology. In the analysis, we show how the localization of transnational anti-gender movements in both countries share a common path. Here, we consider the differences and similarities in strategies, frames, and outcomes in the country-specific political contexts and cycles. Finally, we summarize the theoretical and empirical lessons with respect to the broader dynamics of contemporary contentious gender politics and the resistance it triggers.

Contemporary opposition to gender equality and the anti-gender movements

The contemporary opposition to gender and sexual equality differs from similar contentions in the past, such as the nationally based religious-conservative mobilizations against reproductive rights in Europe (De Zordo et al., 2016), in at least two vital aspects. The first is its diffusion at the transnational level or 'transnationalization of collective action' (Tarrow, 2005) in relation to the opposition to gender and sexual equality politics. Traditionally, feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements have cooperated to establish international mechanisms for ensuring gender and sexual equality (see international 'women's rights' in Gaer, 2009). The conscious efforts of actors to coordinate local protests, bridge frames across different contexts (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 624), and form transnational coalitions to oppose this goal became apparent in the last two decades (Chappell, 2006). For example, the World Congress of Families coordinates and regroups internationally dispersed anti-gender, anti-abortion, pro-family, religious-conservative, and far-right actors (Stoeckl, 2018). Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) have clearly demonstrated the homogeneity of claims, discourses, and repertoires of action across thirteen European countries.

Second, contemporary opposition to gender equality coherently elaborates and strategically uses the 'gender as ideology' frame to achieve high transcultural resonance (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 619). Other recurrent collective action frames (*ibid.*) include the 'protection of family', 'family values', 'sacredness of marriage', 'protection of children', 'gender equality and LGBT rights as cultural imperialism', and 'reproductive rights as immoral' (detailed analysis of frames in Juroš et al., 2020). The coordinated attempts to create a discourse against 'gender ideology' are linked to the Catholic Church and religious institutions who take on the role as allies or main actors of the anti-gender

movement and major supporters of its cause (e.g., AniĆ, 2015; Korolczuk, 2017). Furthermore, populist and right-wing parties are additional major allies in promoting anti-gender campaigns (e.g., Kováts & Pöim, 2015).

We recognize the coordinated spread of homologous tactical repertoires and collective action frames as an instance of social movement diffusion (Givan et al., 2010; Soule & Roggeband, 2019), in particular through the interaction between downward and upward scale shifts (McAdam et al., 2001) from the transnational to the local and vice versa. Our analysis disentangles the mechanisms that led anti-gender movements to the downward scale shift, through what we call *localization*. Building on the concept of recontextualization, by which actors are forced to ‘address the contextual boundness of an inspiring example’ since ‘there may be differences in cultural norms and rules, in political opportunities, and in available resources’ (Roggeband, 2007, p. 248), we define localization as a process encompassing recontextualization, from the transnational to the local, and leading to the successful embedment of a transnational movement in the national contexts. Crucial in this definition is the existence of a transnational movement with coordinated collective action frames and tactical repertoires, and not only the diffusion from an ‘inspiring example’ or ‘initiator’ to an ‘adopter’ movement (*ibid.*). Concretely, we examine the relationships between organizations, tactics, and discourse, on the one hand, and allies and political opportunities on the other, as key factors in the localization of the anti-gender movements. We argue that analyzing the anti-gender movements from the perspective of social movement diffusion enables a more nuanced view of the assumed links between these factors and allows us to inspect the interactive dynamics of the anti-gender movements in relation to other political actors.

Methods and data collection

We use a dual-process tracing method and paired comparison to examine the process of the anti-gender movements’ localization in Croatia and Italy between 2013 and 2019. The paired comparison provides several advantages: it provides a ‘balanced combination of descriptive depth and analytical challenge’ as an intermediate step in theory-building between single-cases and multi-cases (Tarrow, 2010, p. 243). The dual-process tracing perspective specifies the different mechanisms and the key factors in the localization process, while the pairing of the cases potentially mediates any ‘generalization based on single cases.’ Finally, these joint methodologies allow us to further ‘assess the influence of institutions’ and actors at the point at which the common trajectory of the localization diverges (*ibid.*, p. 245).

Our empirical findings are based on a content analysis of press coverage of the anti-gender movements’ campaigns, as well as of material the anti-gender movements made publicly available. For Croatia, the relevant organizations include, among others, Viliagre, GROZD (The Voice of Parents for Children), In the Name of the Family (U ime obitelji), Teen Star, and the political party HRAST. For Italy, groups include the Committee to Defend Our Children (CDNF); La Manif Pour Tous Italy (renamed, Family Generation), Lawyers for Life, ProLife Onlus, and their recognized spokespeople (e.g., Gianfranco Amato, Massimo Gandolfini, and Filippo Savarese). In analyzing organizational materials such as event programs, public speeches on social media channels (YouTube, Facebook), official press releases, leaflets and booklets, and the official

Table 1. Anti-gender movement's base and campaigns.

	ITALY	CROATIA
BASE	• Catholic Church • NGOs • 'ad-hoc' parties • Groups and associations • Ecclesiastical movements	• Catholic Church • NGOs • 'ad-hoc' parties • Groups and associations
ALLIES	• Populist, center and far right parties • Parts of center-left parties • Parts of academia and the scientific community • Specialized press and entrepreneurs	• Populist, center and far right parties • Parts of academia and the scientific community • Specialized press and entrepreneurs
TACTICS	• Street actions (marches, protests, symbolic actions, sit-ins) • Lobbying • Media outlets • Participation in public debates • Party politics	• Street actions (marches, protests, symbolic actions, sit-ins) • Lobbying • Media outlets • Participation in public debates • Party politics
FRAMES	• 'Pro family' or 'Promotion and protection of the natural marriage and family' (against same-sex marriage/sexual equality) • Protect Our Children (against reproductive rights and medically assisted reproductive techniques; against sexual equality, LGBTQI+ rights, and secular health education) • 'Anti-gender' or 'Gender as ideology' (against gender mainstreaming and gender studies)	• 'Pro family' or 'Promotion and protection of the natural marriage and family' (against same-sex marriage/sexual equality) • Protect Our Children (against reproductive rights and medically assisted reproductive techniques; against sexual equality, LGBTQI+ rights, and secular health education) • 'Anti-gender' or 'Gender as ideology' (against gender mainstreaming and gender studies)

websites of relevant organizations, we used a purposeful sampling strategy targeting the salient use of frames recognized in the literature as characteristic of transnational opposition to gender equality by groups and actors (see Table 1).

To account for the factors and allies external to the two anti-gender movements and their situatedness within specific political contexts and cycles, we collected reports on their campaigns from mainstream media outlets and online portals: in Croatia (*Jutarnji list* and *Večernji list*) and in Italy (*La Repubblica* and *Il Corriere*). We also consulted the specialized Catholic press in Croatia (*Glas Koncila*) and in Italy (e.g., *L'Osservatore Romano*, *La Nuova Bussola Quotidiana*, *La Verità*, *Avvenire*, and *Scienza & Vita*). In total, we collected over 40 items (including written, visual, and video material) for each country that document anti-gender movement campaigns between 2013 and 2019. To systematize thematic codes, we relied on the insights into the factors that characterize a movement and account for its success: organizational structure (Kriesi, 1996); framing (Snow et al., 1986) and tactical repertoires (Ennis, 1987); political (Kitschelt, 1986) and discursive opportunities (Koopmans & Statham, 1999); alliances (Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010); and outcomes (Bosi & Uba, 2009).

To capture the changes in relation to variables and mechanisms, we broke down episodes of heightened contestation over the six-year period (2013–2019) into *critical events*. Since critical events, such as government actions, new policies, court decisions, or movement-generated mass demonstrations can alter political opportunities (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, p. 1638), we selected events based on their ability to create a political impact (e.g., triggering a policy change, the introduction of new laws, decisions to hold referendums, movements' involvement in the electoral processes) and/or their resonance (large popular response, magnitude of the events/mass demonstration). Accordingly, for Italy, we selected a total of six critical events, as follows. Two draft bills discussing

Table 2. Selected critical events in Italy and Croatia (2013–2019).

SELECTED CRITICAL EVENTS (2013–2019)		
	ITALY	CROATIA
2013	Draft bill on homotransphobia	Referendum against same-sex marriage
2015	Family Day	Electoral campaign and parliamentary elections
2016	Law on civil partnership Renzi-Boschi constitutional reform	Educational reform protest ‘Croatia Can Do Better’
2018	Parliamentary elections Draft bill on Family Law reform (DDL Pillon)	Opposition to ratification of the Istanbul Convention

significant policy changes in terms of gender rights – one on the introduction of the crime of homotransphobia² in 2013, and another aimed at reforming the Family Law³ in 2018 (known as the ‘Pillon Decree’, named after its proponent) in order to promote both parental figures, and *de facto* enhancing fathers’ rights. The latter was preceded by the parliamentary elections of 2018 as another critical event, insofar it allowed anti-gender actors to reach government positions. In terms of new laws on gender equality, we included the Law on Civil Partnerships of 2016,⁴ legalizing civil unions between same-sex people, as well as the Renzi-Boschi constitutional reform⁵ of the same year, which was followed by a national referendum for its approval that provided a significant political opportunity for the anti-gender movement to campaign against the reform. Finally, we added two mass demonstrations organized by anti-gender actors, the Family Day in 2015 and the World Congress of Families in 2019 (see Table 2).

In the case of Croatia, four critical events meet the criteria of impact and resonance. These include the referendum against same-sex marriage in 2013, the electoral campaign and parliamentary elections in 2015, the educational reform protest ‘Croatia Can Do Better’ in 2016, and finally the opposition to ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2018 (see Table 2). The anti-gender movement used the first two events to change the political and discursive opportunities in its favor. In turn, the opposition used the latter two events to counteract its demands, influence, and resonance.

Localizing anti-gender campaigns in Italy and Croatia

Mirroring opponents’ structures, practices, and language

We identified the use of mirroring strategies in both countries as the first step in the localization of the anti-gender movements. In particular, mirroring strategies were recognizable in the framing, but also in the imitation of protest tactics used by the anti-gender movements. As the outcome of mirroring strategies, we observed the development of isomorphic organizational structures and practices (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). In particular, when anti-gender movements engaged politically in the same venues as feminist and LGBTQI+ movements – as this move required adapting to the respective norms and practices (*ibid.*). In this sense, mirroring strategies are in part driven by cultural and societal pressures and reflect the anti-gender movements’ efforts to build local support and create resonance with the wider public in the national context. We highlight the specificities of each case, but also the similarities in relation to two broader processes: the secularization of religious discourses and the NGO-ization of the Catholic Church, meaning the Church’s efforts to revitalized itself through the action of civil society organizations in defense of religious precepts (Vaggione, 2005). While the former

reflects a process of appropriation (of human rights discourses and language in relation to gender and sexuality issues) typical of progressive civil societies and social movements, the latter should be positioned in the context of the Vatican's New Evangelization Project; that is, advocating for a public role for religion (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). We argue that mirroring is one of the key strategies by which anti-gender movements gained public visibility as collective actors and amplified their resonance in mainstream political debate. Between 2013–2015, both campaigns largely focused on opposition to same-sex marriage (i.e. civil unions) as well as any sex/gender education in schools which could be perceived as a threat to the existing, dominant 'pro-family' (protection of values) curriculum.

Croatia

In a post-transitional and post-conflict country such as Croatia, scholars, activists, and citizens often considered active civil society to be indicative of the successful democratic transition (for instance, in Fink-Hafner, 2015). This perception dates back to the transitional 1990s, during which civil society actors voiced opposition to the government's ethno-nationalist, heteropatriarchal, and authoritarian politics (*ibid.*). In this context, civil society was also considered to be a watchdog, keeping an eye out for government thrusts into the private arena and attacks on individual freedoms. Women's, feminist, lesbian, and gay NGOs made significant use of the internationally recognized 'human rights' frame to advocate for gender and sexual equality (Bilić & Kajinić, 2016).

In Croatia, the anti-gender movement adopted the language of civil liberties and human rights and formally registered their groups as NGOs as early as 2006 (Hodžić & Štulhofer, 2017; Sutlović, 2019). In 2006, the organization GROZD (The Voice of Parents for Children) lobbied against secular health education and called for 'the freedom of parents' to raise their children according to their own values. The anti-gender movement pushed forward its claims by framing these to be in the service of 'protection of children' and 'promotion and protection of the natural marriage and of the family' (Hodžić & Štulhofer, 2017; Juroš et al., 2020; Petričušić et al., 2017; Sutlović, 2019). At first glance, such framing conceals GROZD's agenda, which fundamentally opposes gender and sexual equality. Similarly, we found that actors who opposed the legal recognition of same-sex marriage or secular health education would call upon 'democratic' legitimacy (i.e. the 'will of the (Catholic) majority') and would characteristically 'play with science' (Kuhar, 2015), using pseudoscientific references, and/or referring to proper studies, but misusing the data. These types of discursive maneuvers can be interpreted as the beginning of the religious-conservative (Petričušić et al., 2017) or 'neoconservative' (Sutlović, 2019) movement in the Croatian public sphere.

The anti-gender movement also adopted contentious tactics commonly associated with left-liberal groups. For example, street marches (e.g., the Walk for Life), sit-ins and vigils (e.g., in front of medical facilities providing abortions), but also conventional tactics such as advocacy and lobbying (opposing secular health education and gender mainstreaming). The 2013 referendum campaign against same-sex marriage exemplifies the anti-gender movement's organizational, discursive, and tactical mirroring of the preexisting left-liberal civil society traditions. Launched by the group In the Name of the Family, the campaign collected some 750,000 signatures for a referendum that would constitutionally prevent the legal possibility of same-sex marriage. Despite criticism from

the mainstream media, left-liberal NGOs and some politicians in the government, 65.87% citizens supported the constitutional amendment in a voter turnout of 37.68% (Croatian State Electoral Commission, 2020). This victory proved to be a major coup for the anti-gender movement that encouraged its actors to push for an even more ambitious agenda.

Italy

In Italy, the anti-gender movement encompassed a diversified subset of religious and politically conservative players – pro-life and pro-family groups such as La Manif pour Tous Italia – Family Generation, which reproduced the symbols and repertoires of the homonymous French organization (though independent from it), CDFN, Lawyers for Life, and ProLife Onlus, ecclesiastical movements associated with the Catholic Church, including The Neocatechumenal Way, and political leaders within the League, Brothers of Italy and Forza Italia parties, among others (detailed in Garbagnoli & Prearo, 2017; Lavizzari, 2020; Prearo, 2020). Since the success of the March for Life organized in 2011 and 2012, these players have progressively coalesced around the ‘anti-gender’ cause (see, Prearo, 2020 for a detailed reconstruction of the period up to 2013). The localization through adopting organizational forms of progressive movements unfolds via the NGO-ization (Vaggione, 2005) of the anti-gender movement, which, since 2013 established new, satellite organizations representing a new generation of Catholic activism that has purposely distanced itself from the traditional political entrepreneurs of the Vatican (Lavizzari, 2020). This process reflects a ‘dynamic of externalization of Catholic political work’ (Prearo, 2020, p. 17), through which a new form of Catholic militancy is emerging in Italy. This activism is characterized by being ‘extra-ecclesiastic’, that is, it is increasingly autonomous with regard to ecclesiastical structures and organization and inscribed in a secular discursive framework (Prearo, 2020, p. 22). As mentioned above, this dynamic should be placed in the context of the Vatican’s push for the de-privatization of religion in the face of increasing secularization.

The first critical event in the Italian context – the submission of a draft bill on homotransphobia in Parliament in March 2013 – exemplifies this dynamic. A few months later, the newly-created La Manif Pour Tous Italia – Family Generation mobilized against the introduction of the draft bill in defense of (Catholic) freedom of opinion. Following this, and mirroring argumentation patterns and tactics traditionally employed by progressive movements, between 2013 and 2016, other newly created organizations, such as CDFN, Lawyers for Life and ProLife Onlus, initiated an intense phase of protest events. In terms of framing strategies, similar to Croatia, the anti-gender movement appropriated the discourse of human rights, particularly in the realm of sexual citizenship and so-called human anthropology, including references to a child’s right to be raised by a mother and a father, and the right of parents to educate their children on subjects related to gender and sexuality, as written in the Italian constitution.⁶ This type of framing bridges the protection of the ‘traditional heterosexual family’ and the integrity of the Italian identity and nation, while denying equal rights to LGBTI subjects – interpreted by the anti-gender movement’s actors as ‘special’ rights or individual rights, as opposed to the universality of human rights.⁷ Again, we observe the adoption of pseudoscientific language on gender, not only in terms of law and rights, but also medical terminology. Scientific references are employed to pathologize homosexuality and gender

identity itself, as well as to medicalize the discourses around children's sexuality and to oppose medically assisted reproduction technologies. Concerning the topic of surrogacy, our data shows occurrences of mirroring in arguments that deploy concepts including the exploitation of women's bodies as a form of neocolonialism, the woman's right to be a mother, the commodification of birth rights, as typical for some feminist discourses.⁸

In terms of tactics, mirroring develops most notably through demonstrations and direct actions, and via online activism and social media campaigns. The 'Family Day' rallies that took place in 2015 and 2016 were critical events for the newly established organizations. By proposing the 'Family Day' as the major platform and megaphone through which to display collective worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment (so-called 'WUNC', Tilly, 2004), the anti-gender movement became a visible and credible threat to feminist and LGBTQI+ groups. For the first time, representatives of the anti-gender movement were repeatedly present at public protests such as sit-ins in front of the Government in Rome.

Comparative summary. Both cases demonstrate the presence of a rhetorical and strategic turn in the opposition to gender equality, compared to previous instances of contentious gender politics. By appearing at the same venues and mirroring the language of rights commonly associated with women's, LGBT, and similar advocacy groups, the anti-gender movement's activists gained access to the consultative bodies and widespread media attention. The tactical innovation and the Catholic Church's logistical and political support set the scene for mainstreaming the opposition to gender equality, framed as anti-gender and pro-family politics. We recognize the strong presence of the Catholic Church in the political history and culture of both countries as a key factor for understanding the process of localization, in particular through the modelling of political debates on moral issues, and by anti-gender movements' self-representations as guardians of 'national identity' (Garbagnoli, 2017).

Revealing political ambitions: alliances with right-wing political parties

The high resonance of sexual morality with the wider public and the social antagonism triggered by the 'culture war' (Ozzano & Giorgi, 2015) signals the underexplored ideological potential for biopolitical regulations, ideal for a distinctive right-wing and populist political stance to exploit. As a result, we identify a strategic alliance whereby political interests and agendas converge on both sides: actors from anti-gender movements were able to enter state institutions on the back of the right-wing political parties, and the right-wing political parties appropriated recognizable 'pro-family' and 'anti-gender' frames for electoral purposes. Importantly, our data in both countries demonstrates that interactions with right-wing parties led to a fundamental change in the discursive opportunities around the 'gender question' and notably progressively transformed the 'pro-life' frame into a broader 'pro-family' one, including nativist arguments by right-wing parties.

Croatia

Since 1990, the Croatian political landscape had been dominated by the strong, center-right conservative Croatian Democratic Union (CDU) (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica (HDZ)). The center-left coalitions governed for two terms only: 2000–2003 and 2011–2016. The campaign against same-sex marriage that resulted in a referendum occurred during the rule of the center-left coalition led by the Social Democratic Party (SDP) from

2011–2016. Consequently, the CDU, the Catholic Church, and other right-wing allies supported the anti-gender movement's campaigns as part of the opposition to the government. The spokespeople from the Croatian anti-gender movement, acting through NGOs, also acted through a political party (HRAST; Petričušić et al., 2017, p. 68) and published in right-wing media outlets.⁹

The referendum's success and the accompanying media attention demonstrated that the anti-gender movement had managed to insert its characteristic frames in the local context (detailed on frames in Juroš et al., 2020). Since the violent breakup of the multiethnic Yugoslav socialist state during the 1990s, the right-wing political discourse equated Roman Catholicism with the dominant Croat ethnic identity. The anti-gender movement adapted to this ideological positioning by making claims that sexual and reproductive rights clash with Catholic values, offering 'pro-family values' as a master frame (Benford, 2013) that resonated well in a national context. In this sense, the religious affiliation created a bridge between the ethno-nationalist discourse of the political parties and the anti-gender movement's opposition to gender and sexual equality. Similar to the official discourse of the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, who served since 2010, the parties involved used the term 'demographic crisis' to politicize the declining birth rate and high rate of emigration, both of which are particularly salient in post-socialist Europe. Instead of public investment that would rebuild the social care and health services, right-wing actors hinted at the privatization of social reproduction along heteropatriarchal lines.

We posit that such tactical innovation in the case of the referendum in 2013 might have inspired other Croatian right-wing political actors to endorse exclusionary policies by legal means. For example, the right-wing street protests against the center-left government (with the notable example of the occupation of the Ministry of Veterans¹⁰ by one part of the veterans' associations, 2014–2016) took place in parallel to the internal struggle between the far-right and center-right factions within the CDU, which was the strongest political party in the country. The politicians associated with the far-right wing openly supported the campaigns opposing gender equality, and the veterans' protests. As the CDU's far-right faction dominated the centrists, a window of opportunity opened for the anti-gender movement to enter the formal political arena. This occurred when the CDU officially announced it would gather what it termed the 'Homeland Coalition' (including HRAST) for the forthcoming parliamentary elections in 2015. The endorsement of the anti-gender movement's actors by the strongest political party in the country implied that their agenda had left the political fringes and found the door to mainstream recognition open.

Italy

In 2016, the Democratic Party, the center-left party in government at the time, approved the Law on Civil Partnership, which legally recognized and regulated same-sex civil unions. This critical event sparked public confrontations between anti-gender groups and the progressive civil society, including feminist and LGBTQI+ groups. In the context of a contentious politics of gender in Italy at the time, the approval of the Law on Civil Partnership was a major political opportunity shift for both conflicting sides. Although it represented a political victory for a part of the LGBT movement, our analysis indicates that at this point the anti-gender movement recognized a need for a strategic turn toward the institutional arena.

After the phase of successful public demonstrations, Italy's anti-gender movement politicized its cause through institutional lobbying, facilitated by the 'Catholic diaspora' model of political representation (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019). This model describes the involvement of Catholics (as both electorate and candidates) in defending and promoting religious values in government policies not as a single Catholic party (as it was until the dissolution of the Christian Democracy Party in 1994), but as dispersed throughout every party along the political spectrum. At this stage, we identified that the anti-gender movement rhetorically aligned the approval of civil partnerships with other recurring claims, notably the criminalization of homophobia and sex education.

We understand these tactics as an attempt to reach a broad population with diverse values (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, p. 1639). To this end, the anti-gender movement extended the frame of a 'struggle against gender ideology' to include a broader range of issues, such as same-sex marriage, adoption, 'uterus for rent,' abortion, and women's rights, and linked these issues to a 'decline in family values' and changes in gender roles.

The referendum on the Renzi–Boschi constitutional reform (2016) was another political opportunity for the anti-gender movement (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019), and, in our analysis, another critical event. In May 2016, the promoters of the Family Day formed an ad hoc committee with the name of Families Against the Referendum. Discursively, this initiative aimed at discrediting the government in office (led by the center-left Democratic Party) by presenting the constitutional reform and the approval of the civil unions bill as an attempt to disparage the traditional family, and thus the foundations of Italian society.¹¹ In this context, the anti-gender movement's rhetoric shifted more clearly from an 'anti-gender' to a 'pro-family' stance (Prearo, 2018). We interpret this initiative also as a strategic attempt at alliance-building, aligning the anti-gender movement's position to right-wing parties, notably Matteo Salvini's League, Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia*, and Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy.¹² Simultaneously, the referendum represented a discursive opportunity for the right-wing parties to reinforce their own position on these issues through the instrumentalization of religion in their political rhetoric and by supporting anti-gender movement members in their electoral lists.

Comparative summary. We found that in both countries, anti-gender movements used the 'pro-family' frame more intensively than the 'pro-life' or 'anti-gender' ones, in order to achieve the desired cultural resonance in local contexts, and to ally with existing center-right and far-right parties. The ideological linking phase occurred in parallel to the re-grouping of the right-wing political options, during which the far-right factions gained power. Croatia and Italy reflect a broader European-wide rise in the popularity of right-wing, ethno-nationalist, and populist options during this period (Luo, 2017; an overview in Wodak et al., 2013). Consequently, anti-gender movements exploited favorable political and discursive opportunities at both the international and local level.

Embedding and implementing opposition to gender and sexual equality

Anti-gender movements' embedment in the arena of party politics and state institutions represents the last step in the process of localization as a consequence of and complementary to the processes of NGO-ization and alliance-building described above, we argue. Whereas the first two phases of localization run in parallel in Italy and Croatia, the two cases diverge in the final phase as the result of differing circumstances at the local level. We argue that this turn can be explained by the interactionist character of contentious gender politics: clustering at both ends of the political spectrum occurs as parties seek allies to promote their cause, linking their success to the broader political and discursive opportunities available.

Croatia

The second critical event in Croatia was the electoral victory of the Homeland Coalition in 2016. In the wake of this victory, the anti-gender movement was able to enter the legislative and executive political arena. Cuts in the financial support for left-liberal civil society groups and the independent media, particularly those of a feminist and LGBTQI+ nature, were some of the government's first measures. Government officials announced further interventions in culture and education in line with the politically conservative agenda. Accordingly, the Ministry for Education selected a group of outspoken conservatives at the same time as Boris Jokić, the leader of the old Commission for the Reform of the Educational Curriculum, resigned from his position, accusing the newly appointed right-wing government of obstructing the commission's work.¹³ The replacement of the old commission by a new and outspokenly conservative one by the government triggered an ideologically diverse network of groups, initiatives, and unions to coordinate a series of actions that culminated in the protest for an independent educational reform (Croatia Can Do Better).

As part of the counter framing strategy, the protest's organizers appropriated the 'pro-children' master frame by giving it a 'progressive' and 'secular' twist. This critical event demonstrated that a contentious gender politics had transcended the original movements and triggered the formation of broad 'left' vs. 'right' political blocks. Such dynamics enabled the progressive groups to link gender and sexual equality with the defense of an open and liberal education, protection of ethnic minorities, and freedom of the media and art expression. As the second-largest popular protest since the country's independence, Croatia Can Do Better channeled symbolic and strategic resistance to the ruling far-right government.

The short-lived government led by the CDU and its partners (January–October 2016) resigned soon after due to a series of corruption controversies, popular discontent, and unsuccessful coalition dynamics. Yet, the CDU was reelected in the autumn of 2016, following an internal reorganization that silenced the far-right faction in favor of the centrist voices. Accordingly, the party tried to distance itself from the characteristic populist far-right discourse, including the withdrawal of support for the anti-gender agenda. Consequently, the government's announcement that it would ratify the Istanbul Convention¹⁴ caused the anti-gender movement and its allies to rebel against its recent partners. Together

with members of the clergy, veterans' associations, and the far-right parties, in 2018 the anti-gender movement's actors organized demonstrations against the ratification.¹⁵ A march against reproductive rights, the Walk for Life, followed in 2019. As the major political party in the country began distancing itself from its former allies, the anti-gender movement was still vocal, but its claims ceased to be a direct threat. We conclude that the internal reorganization of the largest political party halted the further embedment of the anti-gender movement.

Italy

While gaining ground in schools, public services, and the government, Italy's anti-gender movement also diversified its strategy by embedding its claims in a revitalized pro-family and anti-feminist stance on women's reproductive rights. Prior to the Italian 4 March 2018 elections, Massimo Gandolfini, the founder and leader of the CDNF and the major promoter of the Family Day, explicitly invited Italian citizens to vote for center-right parties on the basis of their commitment to the anti-gender movement's values and goals – pro-life, pro-family and freedom of education.¹⁶ The subsequent political success of the center-right coalition led by the League, along with the populist Five Star Movement, allowed the anti-gender movement to enhance its power of agenda-setting by allying with the League, notably through the double membership of some of its activists. In fact, the latter occupied several important offices, including Lorenzo Fontana as Minister of Family and Disability, and Simone Pillon in the Senate as vice-president of the Commission for Children and Adolescents. With the support of center and radical right allies in the government, the anti-gender movement gained a privileged position from which to attack women's and LGBTQI+ rights. Some of the coalition's first legal proposals were in line with the opposition to gender and sexual equality. The elected senator from the League, Simone Pillon, who was the creator of the controversial 'Pillon bill' championed a radical and revitalized theo-conservative stance within the government. Senator Pillon fueled media debates 2018 and 2019 by claiming 'a gay lobby exists and plans to recruit homosexuals among our children', 'witchcraft is taught in schools' (referring to gender and sex education), and 'today there are no conditions to change Law 194,¹⁷ but we will get there' (Arachi, 2018).

The World Congress of Families, held in Verona in March 2019, is the final critical event in the Italian case. We interpret this event as the culmination of the coalition government's dedication to the promotion of anti-gender and anti-feminist claims and the direct outcome of the processes described above. Minister of the Interior and leader of the League Matteo Salvini participated in the event, along with other international leaders who shared the same ideological beliefs and whose presence gave the appearance of governmental support.

Comparative summary. As the last step of localization, both anti-gender movements underwent a process of embedment as members of right-wing governments (Croatia in 2016 and Italy in 2018), and agendas who oppose gender and sexual equality became part of government programs. Our analysis shows that coalitional dynamics and allies at both ends of the political spectrum must be considered in the localization of the anti-gender movement. The Croatian case demonstrates that, in the later stages, the broad oppositional block on the left managed to turn the local discursive opportunities in its favor, partially by keying the countermovement's master frames – that is, restating claims made

by the opponent in a way as to give them new meanings that stand in contrast to the original ones (Benford & Hunt, 2003, p. 170) – and by using the cracks in the right-wing coalition to its advantage despite the still favorable transnational discursive opportunities for the populist options. Conversely, in Italy, the absence of a clustering process between the political forces of the left and the movements under threat guaranteed a longer, successful embedment of the anti-gender movement.

Conclusions

This study investigated the contemporary opposition to gender and sexual equality in Italy and Croatia from 2013 to 2019 as a case study of the transnational diffusion of anti-gender movements. The article deepens our understanding of movement diffusion mechanisms in different contexts by identifying the key phases of and the factors behind the successful localization and mainstreaming of the anti-gender cause. Specifically, we examined the different steps that led to the downward scale shift of transnationally coordinated frames, organizations, and tactics within the framework of the contentious politics of gender. While we acknowledge the bidirectional and interactive character of the mechanisms contributing to the diffusion of anti-gender campaigns and movements – upward and downward, from the transnational to the local and vice versa – in this study, we focused on disentangling the factors that steered the successful diffusion across the two national contexts. We identified a three-step process of localization: first, mirroring the strategies and discourses of civil society and progressive movements; second, forming political alliances with right-wing parties; and finally, entering the electoral arena and embedding as a part of the government. Our findings emphasize that the diffusion of the transnational movement opposing gender and sexual equality followed similar paths in the first two steps of localization, through mirroring strategies and alliances with right-wing coalitions. However, the localization process differed in the final stage of embedment as a result of the diverse configurations of the contentious politics of gender in the respective national contexts, at least for the given research period.

Moreover, speaking to the previous research on counter-movements dynamics, our analysis of the localization process shows that the development of isomorphic tendencies is a salient characteristic of the contentious gender politics, resulting from the interactions between the anti-gender movement and progressive, LGBTIQ+ and feminist movements.

Future research should engage further in a detailed analysis of the mechanisms that led to the upward scale shift of anti-gender campaigns in order to gain a better grasp of how this reaction to feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements continues to intensify across an increasing number of locales as well as at the transnational level. Along these lines, it is crucial to analyze and compare instances of response and resistance at the national level, while ascertaining whether a coordinated form of resistance also exists transnationally. Additional studies could explore in more depth the emergence and development of isomorphic tendencies, not only between movement and countermovement, but also

vis-à-vis political parties and other allies, as an alternative (or complement) to the embedment process analyzed in this paper.

Endnotes

1. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex.
2. Draft bill n. 245, XVII Legislatura, 'Disposizioni in materia di contrasto dell'omofobia e della transfobia'.
3. Atto Senato n. 735, XVIII Legislatura, 'Norme in materia di affido condiviso, mantenimento diretto e garanzia di bigenitorialità'.
4. Law 76/2016, 'Regolamentazione delle unioni civili tra persone dello stesso sesso e disciplina delle convivenze'.
5. Prime Minister Matteo Renzi launched the referendum to reform the constitution, including the composition and powers of Parliament (encompassing the Senate). However, 59.11% of the electorate voted against the proposed reform after which Matteo Renzi resigned. Retrieved from *La Repubblica*, available at <https://www.repubblica.it/static/speciale/2016/referendum/costituzionale/>, last accessed 23 December 2021.
6. E.g. La Manif Pour Tous Italia – Generazione Famiglia (2015). *L'ideologia gender è contro l'uomo*; Pillon, S. (2014). *Le radici storico-filosofiche dell'indifferentismo sessuale*. <https://bit.ly/3EbILN5>, last accessed 16 December 2021.
7. Amato, G. (12 December 2013). Tredici motivi per dire no alla legge sull'omofobia. *La Nuova Bussola Quotidiana*. <https://bit.ly/3yIrrnP>, last accessed 18 October 2021); Salvini, M. (30 March 2019). *Intervento al XII WCF*. Facebook, available at: <https://bit.ly/2M019Gi>, last accessed December, 2021.
8. Amato, G. (2015). *Gender (D)istruzione*. Fede&Cultura, Verona.
9. One example is the online news portal *Narod.hr*, available at: <https://narod.hr/>, last accessed 22 December 2021.
10. From 2014 to 2016 one part of the veterans' associations staged a series of protest actions demanding the resignation of the center-left Minister of Veterans' Affairs.
11. Guerra, M. (25 May 2016). Gandolfini schiera il Family Day sul no al referendum. *La Nuova Bussola Quotidiana*. <https://bit.ly/3shBRty>; CDNF, last accessed 26 November 2016). *Famiglie per il no a Verona*. Associazione Family Day – Difendiamo i Nostri Figli. <https://bit.ly/3J2hIh7>
12. CDNF (5 March 2018). *Gandolfini (Family Day): Mantenuta la promessa fatta a Renzi: fecondare le forze del centro destra*. Associazione Family Day – Difendiamo i Nostri Figli. <https://bit.ly/3qb9f2A>, last accessed December, 22, 2021.
13. The educational reform was planned over several years and according to their advocates was supposed to make Croatian pupils 'better prepared' for the contemporary economic context through the dissemination of 'practical' knowledge, and training in 'critical thinking' with regard to the ethos of tolerance and diversity. More on the reform and the protest available at <https://hrvatskamozebolje.org/>, last accessed 22 December 2021.
14. The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.
15. Photo gallery in *Jutarnji.hr*, available at <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/prosvjed-protiv-ratifikacije-istanbulske-konvencije-u-zagrebu-7167366>, last accessed last accessed 22 December 2021).
16. Gandolfini, M. (24 January 2018). *Il Comitato Difendiamo i Nostri Figli al voto*. Provita&Famiglia Onlus. <https://bit.ly/3Eh7KoE>, last accessed 22 December 2021.
17. Law 194/78 refers to the legalization of abortion in Italy in 1978.

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