



LEARNING FROM “THE EAST”: TRANSNATIONAL ANTI-GENDER MOBILIZATION AND THE WEST/EAST DIVIDE

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In 2017, the World Congress of Families (WCF), one of the leading transnational networks that opposes the concept of gender and LGBTQ+ rights, held its global conference in Budapest, Hungary. On that occasion, the WCF’s long-time president and a co-founder of the U.S.-based National Organization for Marriage, Brian Brown, gave a speech in which he praised Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his cabinet for their pro-natalist family policy and promotion of what he sees as Christian values. Brown’s deep admiration for Orbán’s ideas and politics was readily apparent in the culmination of the speech, when he exclaimed “Let’s learn from one another, let’s learn from Hungary!”

Such open admiration for a country located in Europe’s post-state socialist East may come as a surprise to many. For many years, and especially during and after the Cold War, post-state socialist Eastern Europe was commonly regarded as insufficiently advanced politically, culturally, and economically. In line with this logic, ever since the fall of the Iron Curtain, Eastern European countries have often been regarded as students in need of permanent supervision and tutoring by their Western counterparts ([Kováts 2021](#); [Rumelili 2004](#)). Over the past two decades, the rights of sexual minorities—or their lack thereof—have become an important part of this teacher-student relationship. In this regard, incidents of political homophobia and attacks on Pride Marches in some Eastern European countries have often been interpreted as signs of Eastern European deficiency and insufficient development ([Kahlina 2015](#); [Renkin 2015](#)).

Yet, as I will show in this article, radically different geopolitical meanings pertaining to the Cold War “East”/“West” divide are being fostered and promoted by anti-gender actors.¹ As the abovementioned speech by Brian Brown suggests, in the context of transnational anti-gender mobilization, former state-socialist countries, including Russia, have come to be regarded as valuable role models for their Western counterparts. In addition to shifting the student-teacher roles, Western anti-gender actors also articulate a strong critique of the contemporary liberal West, especially when it comes to the recent proliferation of LGBTQ+ rights in many countries of the geopolitical West.

I would argue that these new meanings of the old Cold War West/East classification can be seen as key parts of a new civilizationalist imaginary. This imaginary is based on the idea of a common Christian civilization that is seen as being threatened by the contemporary liberal politics of gender and sexuality. As I will show, by combining the heterosexist² concept of family and references to Christianity with overt anti-immigration

arguments, this new geopolitical discourse unsettles the asymmetrical symbolic divide between the East and the West inherited from the Cold War period.

World Congress of Families: Collaborations across the East/West Divide

Political mobilizations driven by heterosexist claims of the moral, cultural, and social superiority of nuclear families and essentialized sexual difference have gained momentum in recent years. The intensification of family-focused campaigns has been particularly visible in Europe, where a large number of actions and initiatives targeting the adoption of same-sex marriage laws, legal access to abortion on demand, and the very concept of gender appeared in different countries throughout the 2010s ([Kováts and Põim 2015](#); [Kuhar and Paternotte 2017](#)). Although forms of action differ from country to country, ranging from grassroots-organized street protests and national referendums on marriage to legal changes and governmental policies, striking discursive resemblances can be identified across different national contexts.

A closer look into the dynamics of transnational cooperation among anti-gender actors reveals strong connections across the East/West divide. Such connections are particularly visible within the abovementioned World Congress of Families, which represents one of the most powerful and enduring networks of actors who oppose more inclusionary policies on sexuality and gender. Established by members of the [influential U.S. Christian Right](#) in the mid-1990s, the WCF organizes global and regional conferences and gatherings with the [aim](#) of “unit[ing] and equip[ping] leaders, organizations, and families to affirm, celebrate, and defend the natural family as the only fundamental and sustainable unit of society.”

While members of the U.S. Christian Right still play a key role in managing the WCF, the last three WCF global conferences have seen the surprising prominence of actors from Europe, particularly its Eastern part, including such countries as Hungary, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Russia. In fact, according to some of the WCF’s leading figures, the partnership between members of the U.S. Christian Right and their Russian counterparts has been one of the key alliances within the WCF network since its inception in the 1990s. In his speech at the WCF meeting in Budapest in 2017, Allan Carlson, one of the founders of the WCF, asserted that the idea of founding such a network came when he was in Moscow in the mid-1990s. According to Carlson, the end of the Cold War opened up space for exploring the similarities and differences between West and East and for building an international “pro-family” movement together (see also [Stoeckl 2020](#)).

According to the “Rights at Risk” [report](#), the WCF’s organizational partners include some of the leading “pro-family” and anti-abortion civil society organizations and initiatives in the US and Europe, such as the U.S.-based Alliance Defending Freedom, Family Watch International, and National Organization for Marriage; CitizenGo from Spain; and Novae Terrae and ProVita from Italy. While one African and two Latin American organizations are listed, the vast majority of key partners come from the US, Europe, and Russia. This suggests, at least for now, a rather strong rootedness of the WCF in the Global North, including Eastern Europe and Russia. The dominance of the Global North has also been reflected in the places where WCF conferences have been held. While some of the organization’s smaller regional conferences have taken place in Latin America and Africa, its bigger global conferences have to date largely been limited to Europe, North America, and Australia. The first WCF global conference was organized in Prague, in post-state socialist Czechia, in 1997, while the most recent three congresses have taken place in Budapest, Hungary in 2017, in Chisinau, Moldova in 2018, and in Verona, Italy in 2019.

In order to understand how alliances within the WCF unsettle the East/West hierarchy inherited from the Cold War period, let me turn to two key geopolitical discourses voiced by WCF participants. The first is an anti-colonial discourse critical of the West, while the second is a discourse of common belonging to an endangered Christian civilization.

Brothers in Arms: Building Alliances through Anti-Colonial Discourse

Anti-colonial discourse is one of the most common rhetorical means through which anti-gender actors have critiqued current Western liberal values (see, for example, [Korolczuk and Graff 2018](#)). Interestingly, Western WCF affiliates (particularly from the US and France) have been particularly invested in voicing the anti-Western discourse, especially in their critiques of transnational institutions such as the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, and the European Commission. In her speech at the WCF meeting in Budapest, Ludovine de la Rochère, president of the French Protest for All (*La manif pour tous*) initiative, sharply criticized the EU for allowing stronger EU members to impose their sexual politics on less powerful members. During the same congress, Janine Crouse, a board member of the International Organization for the Family (IOF) and a person with lobbying experience at the UN, condemned the UN for “cultural imperialism,” specifically “exporting the worst excesses of the Western world across the globe.”

Similar anti-colonial discourse critical of the liberal West has also been present in some of the key documents produced by the WCF. The [Cape Town Universal Declaration on the Family and Marriage](#), initiated by the WCF and IOF in December 2016 and signed by the members of the WCF network, pledges to “resist the rising cultural imperialism of Western powers”:

Together we join in common cause, East and West, North and South, to stand for a truth that no government can change. Bowing to no earthly power, using every just measure, we shall not falter or flag until the truth about marriage is embraced in our laws and honored in our lands.

As Doris Buss and Didi Herman show in their seminal book [Globalizing Family Values](#), a critique of global interventionism, especially by the UN, has long been one of the key strategies used by the U.S. Christian Right to empower their domestic agenda. With the proliferation of anti-gender networks across the West/East divide, one can argue, the anti-colonial critique of the liberal West can be seen as having acquired another critical role: as a uniting discourse that helps to mitigate the hierarchical divisions of the post-Cold War era. This unity has been further strengthened and manifested through the frequent use of the pronoun “us,” accompanied by the antagonistic “us vs. them” distinction.

However, openness to non-Western contexts within the WCF has its limits. WCF's restricted inclusivity is especially visible in the extreme anti-immigration views shared by many WCF participants. Thus, the seemingly very inclusive anti-colonial discourse of WCF partners and participants, which invites “East and West, North and South” to come together and resist “Western ideological colonization,” stands in tension with the anti-immigration discourses frequently voiced at WCF conferences. As I will show below, anti-immigration discourse—combined with heterosexist ideas of gender and sexuality—constitutes a key element of a new civilizationalist imaginary based on the idea of a shared Christian civilization.

Integrating the Anti-Gender with Anti-Immigration Politics

The depth of the contradiction between the anti-colonial and anti-immigration discourses present at WCF gatherings is best understood if we attend to the [opening speech](#) that Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán delivered at the WCF meeting in Budapest. Orbán started his speech with a strong anti-immigration position:

But first allow me to address you as a European politician. In 2015, when we last met, Europe was under siege. [...] Europe is old, rich, and weak. The part of the world which in recent years has sent forth ever more masses of people is, however, young, poor, and strong. The world's population is rapidly growing, while the population of Europe is declining. [...] Europe, our common homeland, is losing out in the population competition between great

civilizations. Fewer and fewer marriages are producing fewer and fewer children, and the population is therefore aging and declining.

He went on to more explicitly link anti-immigration politics and restrictive gender and sexuality politics based on utilizing women's reproductive capacities:

In Europe today there are two distinct views on [population decline]. One of these is held by those who want to address Europe's demographic problems through immigration. And there is another view, held by Central Europe—and, within it, Hungary. Our view is that we must solve our demographic problems by relying on our own resources and mobilizing our own reserves. [...] In the struggle for the future of Europe, stopping illegal migration is imperative. This struggle—which is rationally justified—is only worthwhile if we are able to combine it with a family policy which restores natural reproduction on the continent.

A similar intersection of heterosexist, anti-immigration, and ethno-nationalist politics can be seen in the speeches two years later of Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini, MEP Nicholas Bay, and a handful of others at the WCF in Verona. While racializing Islamophobia is only implied in Orbán's speech, it is more openly expressed in Salvini's [speech](#), which contains a direct reference to Islam as a source of threat to women's rights:

The feminists that speak of women's rights and are the first to pretend not to see what is the first, only, and major real danger in 2019 for rights, social achievements, freedom to work, study, speak, study, dress as you like—and it's not the World Family Congress—it's Islamic extremism, a culture where the woman's value is less than zero.

Arguably, WCF participants articulate two key sources of geopolitical threat. One source of threat is located in the Islamic racialized “difference,” which is perceived as a danger to a vaguely defined “our civilization.” In this sense, pronatalist policies aimed at increasing the birth rate and informed by anti-gender and anti-abortion attitudes are seen as a way of countering the unwanted mixing of different cultures through immigration while securing the economic sustainability of the nation.

Along with immigration, there is another source of civilizationalist threat articulated by many within the WCF network. This threat is perceived as coming from contemporary liberal politics, especially its affirmative LGBTQ+ and gender policies. This emancipatory politics of gender and sexuality is seen as undermining the foundations of the claimed Christianity-based Western civilization and its core values. At the same time, the contemporary inclusionary politics of gender and sexuality is seen as closely linked to demographic decline, which is interpreted as a threat to the very existence of imagined European civilization.

Looking at “the East”: Christianity and Shifting East/West Relations

In contrast to the EU, which is often regarded as one of the key promoters of unwanted liberal policies, the countries of Eastern Europe—particularly Hungary and Poland—together with Italy and Russia are seen as role models and potential saviors of Christianity-based European or Western civilization. During the WCF conferences in Budapest and Verona, Hungary was frequently hailed as a leading “family-friendly” nation, while, as mentioned earlier, WCF president Brian Brown openly expressed his admiration for Hungary as a model. Texts published on the website of the IOF, which runs the WCF, reveal many more examples of “Eastern virtue.” More than a few entries in the rubric called International Family News express open admiration for the countries of the former state-socialist bloc (such as Russia, Hungary, and Poland) and their pro-natalist family policies and anti-LGBTQ+ laws.

This new sexual civilizational imaginary thus shifts perceptions of “the East” from “poor, uneducated little brother” to a role model for politics related to gender and sexuality. These alliances and shifting West/East power relations are commonly based on a reference to Christianity as a uniting force and the ultimate moral authority. In other words, within the WCF, Christianity becomes a source of common politics of gender and sexuality and the basis of common cultural belonging. This sense of common cultural belonging through Christianity can be seen as overriding the historical East/West division and providing the basis for a new civilizationalist imaginary that replaces the old Cold War notion of “the West” with the idea of an endangered Christian civilization.

Finally, it is also important to note that the ongoing Russian military attack on Ukraine has created some of the greatest geopolitical turbulence since 1989. As mentioned earlier, prior to the war in Ukraine, Russia and its political leaders were perceived as part and parcel of the shared Christian civilizationalist circle and key partners in the WCF. It is thus unsurprising that the WCF and its media partner International Family News have yet to clearly condemn Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine. At the same time, some Russian conservatives, including the head of Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, have [used](#) a very similar narrative—that of the righteous war against the liberal colonial West—to justify Russian aggression against Ukraine. However, it remains to be seen to what extent and in what ways the war in Ukraine will influence U.S.-Russian cooperation within the WCF and its Christian civilizationalist geopolitical discourse.

¹ Small portions of this article were published in the popular scientific Finnish webjournal *Politiikasta* (see [Kahlina 2020](#)).

² I refer to the concept of heterosexism as a way of accounting for the interplay between normative heterosexuality, which stigmatizes non-heterosexual people and relations, and unequal gender relations ([Peterson 1999](#)).