DEMANDS AS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENT AND ILLIBERAL POLITICS: THE CASE OF SLOVAK ANTI-ABORTION DISCOURSE

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Since 2018, Slovakia has witnessed unprecedented attacks on access to legal and safe abortion. Over the past five years, more than twenty bills have been introduced in the Parliament that have aimed either to ban abortion or to limit women's possibility of terminating their pregnancies. Under the current law—in force since 1986—abortion is allowed in the first 12 weeks of gestation upon written request of the pregnant woman, who does not need to provide any justification for her decision. Similarly to other post-socialist countries, the abortion law began to be challenged very soon after the regime change in 1989. A few barriers were introduced in the 2000s, including an obligatory 48-hour waiting period, compulsory counseling, and the imposition on doctors of a duty to report women younger than 18 years old seeking an abortion. All of these are still in place. In practice, access to abortion is even more limited: there is a lack of information about abortion services; many healthcare institutions do not provide abortion at all; women need to repeatedly travel sometimes more than 100 km to get abortion care; and this care is not covered by health insurance and can cost up to 400 euros.
While access to abortion has been a mobilizing but also sensitive political issue since the early 1990s, always teetering on the brink of restriction, 2018 was a turning point. The global anti-gender movement provided a discursive and structural opportunity for old conservative actors, as well as for new populist, anti-establishment, far-right, and even fascist MPs, who accelerated and strengthened their actions against abortion. Sexual and reproductive health and rights, particularly access to abortion, has thus become one of the topics pursued by anti-gender politics that has resonated in Slovakia the most, together with the *Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* (known as the Istanbul Convention) and the human rights of LGBTQIA+ people.

A strong opposition formed against the efforts to restrict abortion. An anti-fascist initiative; feminist and queer organizations; and individuals around the country and beyond organized street protests and workshops and wrote repeatedly to MPs. A new civic initiative, *We Won't Be Silent,* connected various actors. Besides using more traditional advocacy tools, this movement also reclaimed the public space and played with symbols. Allies were asked to bring wooden spoons, pans, pots, and brooms to the streets and to declare their civil disobedience. "We are here to rethink what is often considered to be taken for granted, such as the presence, bodies, and work of women," declared a speaker at the street protest in Bratislava. As Veronika Valkovičová and I described, the aim "was to move beyond the individual framework, to address a variety of structural social

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inequalities and link them to the protest." Sexual and reproductive justice was approached and presented as an issue of broader social justice, care, and solidarity. And it has had implications for the anti-abortion discourse itself.

Between 2018 and 2023, we observed two shifts in introduced bills and amendments: a discursive shift and a shift in parliamentary support. While early bills talked about irresponsible women who kill children to pursue their careers, more recent ones have been presented as supporting pregnant women in difficult situations. Whereas the former bills never passed the first reading in the parliament, the latter ones were only one vote away from passing the last reading and are, in 2023, still on the parliamentary agenda.

Therefore, this article examines the discursive development of the Slovak anti-abortion bills introduced between 2018 and 2023 and their parliamentary support in the broader context of the discourse of anti-gender actors and the strong feminist resistance. I argue that this case sheds light on the connection between anti-gender and illiberal politics, as well as the potential opposition to these global developments.

The Argumentation of Anti-Abortion Bills

The initial anti-abortion bills in 2018 were presented by the neofascist party Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko (People's Party Our Slovakia, further ĽSNS), which has introduced the same or similar bills every six months since then [1]. The party's aim is to "tighten abortion policy in Slovakia and ban arbitrary and unjustified abortions." According to the explanatory reports of these bills, the current situation is a result of Bolshevik materialism and liberal egoism; the social argument is not valid anymore, and potential mothers terminate their pregnancies because of their careers and debauched lifestyle. Therefore—the story goes—MPs seek to protect unborn children, who comprise the most vulnerable social group. Moreover, the bill is supposed to change the negative demographic trend observed in Slovakia and support the pension system in the long run. The argumentation of this parliamentary group has not changed over time.

Another stable element in the anti-abortion fight has been the bill introduced every six months since 2018 by MP Richard Vašečka, who entered the Parliament on the party ticket of the strongest government party, OĽANO. In the explanatory report, he acknowledges that the issue of abortion is sensitive and it is not possible to achieve the desired state: a complete abortion ban. However, the report continues, it is necessary to eliminate discrimination against unborn children, and in particular unborn children with disabilities. At the same time, the draft law claims to protect women who are being forced to terminate their pregnancies by family members, partners, or even medical staff. Vašečka has presented his bill as the first step down the long road to an abortion ban. Similarly to ĽSNS, Vašečka has been presenting almost the same explanatory report for over 5 years.

None of these bills have ever passed the first reading in the Parliament, however. When they were first introduced in 2018, they met with strong opposition from human rights and feminist civil society organizations, civic initiatives, and individuals. These groups' open letter to MPs in 2018 combined arguments about the human rights of women—such as the right to decide freely the number and timing of one's children, the right to health, and the right to life—with arguments about the need to respect and trust women, and to provide effective solutions to the everyday problems of individuals and families in the country. Their goal was to argue that while the number of abortions in the country has been decreasing, people are struggling with issues that are not being addressed by political representatives.

In 2019 there was a slight shift in the argumentation of anti-abortion actors. A group of MPs introduced an anti-abortion bill "to improve social and family legislation" and "to contribute to the protection of life from

conception, to assist pregnant women who find themselves in a difficult life situation, and to make the mediation of foster family care more effective." Besides imposing restrictions on abortion, the bill also aimed to facilitate anonymous births and adoption for employed women and students. The main goal moved closer to addressing the social and practical aspects of unwanted pregnancies. Other bills introduced around this time claimed to improve access to information for pregnant women and thus aimed to prolong the mandatory waiting period. These included the so-called "heartbeat bill," presented as an effort "to ban the advertisement of abortion" and "to provide sufficient information to women seeking abortion." The latter passed two readings in the Parliament before being rejected following strenuous protests from international bodies such as the European Parliament and the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe; international and Slovak civil society organizations; street protestors; and other individual and collective popular initiatives across the country.

The feminist opposition argued that the anti-abortion fight was becoming disguised as social support. It addressed the particularities of each presented bill and combined human rights argumentation with calls for solidarity and social and economic support for women and families. "We will not be silent about the fact that motherhood and parenthood as such should not entail a risk of poverty for anyone. We will not be silent about the need to improve the living conditions of women and families. We will not be silent about the fact that contraception should not be a luxury. We will not be silent about the need for quality sex education or the need to provide unbiased information on family planning, nor will we be silent about the need for dignified and respectful pregnancy, childbirth, and postnatal care," went one of the speeches at a street protest by the civic initiative *We Won't Be Silent*.

However, 2020 brought a new parliamentary effort presented as a bill to protect pregnant women. "The debate on support for pregnant women and mothers has been long-standing, but to date, it has received only scant attention in legislation. The proposed amendment aims to create support measures for a woman who is considering applying for an abortion. The amendment is intended to give the woman a realistic opportunity to decide after considering all the information available and the options available to her to direct her life responsibly. The proposed ban on advertising is intended to preserve a woman's autonomy and freedom of choice," states the explanatory report.

The bill highlighted the actual social problems of women and families in the country: having children increases the risk of poverty, one-parent families have trouble making ends meet, and there is a lack of care services for disabled children. However, instead of offering solutions, it introduced several "band-aids" for these holes in the vulnerable social system. For instance, the bill did not propose to increase the one-time financial support that women currently get after giving birth, only to divide it into two parts, with the first half to be paid in the twelfth week of pregnancy. Similarly, the lack of crisis housing and other related services was not addressed in the bill; instead, it was just stated that crisis housing should be available to pregnant women and their children. Specific issues related to inclusive education, health care, and other care services for children with disabilities remained untouched by the bill, although it did promise a new one-off payment to women who gave birth to a child with a disability. These measures therefore seem more like the state financing births than actual social support.

Despite the insufficient solutions, what seemed to matter was an improved framing of the bill. No longer was the presented aim to restrict abortion. Instead, the goals—as presented by MPs—were to protect and financially support women, to improve their social situation and access to information, and to deal with the poverty of families. These issues resonated in society and the media not only because they reflected actual social issues,

but also because they are usually politically ignored and underestimated. Even insufficient measures are considered better than nothing.

What we observed in the case of the anti-abortion efforts was the construction of an equivalential chain where the promise to protect life also represented seemingly unrelated promises concerned with cultural recognition, material redistribution, and political representation.

The Illiberal Offer in the Anti-Gender Discourse

To explain this argument, I will look at the broader discourse of anti-gender actors. In an analysis I conducted with Pavol Hardoš, we argued that anti-gender discourse in Slovakia (2014-2020) created an equivalential chain in which demands for cultural recognition, material redistribution, and political representation could be identified. To date, this nexus has been largely overlooked, as research into anti-gender politics mostly focuses on those aspects that most obviously relate to gender equality policies and the rights of LGBTQIA+ people and women: opposition to the concept of gender, gender stereotypes, sex education, same-sex marriage, etc. So what else can we observe in the demands for the protection of life articulated by anti-gender actors in Slovakia between 2014 and 2020?

<table>
<tr><th colspan="3">Protection of life</th></tr>
<tr><th>Cultural recognition</th><th>Material distribution</th><th>Political representation</th></tr>
<tr><td>Protection of the right to life from conception to natural death</td><td>"Support of social reproduction" and "improving quality of life"</td><td>Individual freedom and state autonomy</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Reproduction of the Slovak nation and solution to demographic crises</td><td>Political voice and representation</td></tr>
<tr><td>Protection of children</td><td>Respect, social, and economic support for pregnant women</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Protection of pregnant women</td><td>Economic support for poor (employed) women and families</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Protection of the current structures of society and protection of the "civilization"</td><td>Social and material support for elderly and sick people</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Family mainstreaming</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Psychological and material support for women who have been raped</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Liberating society from Communist legislation and neomarxism</td></tr>
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Figure 1. The equivalential chain of demands—protection of life

It is not surprising that anti-gender actors—citing the Constitution, Bible, and moral code—demanded protection of the right to life from conception to natural death. As they recognized life from conception, unborn children were argued to be the most vulnerable group in society, as they had no voice. Anti-gender actors adopted the vocabulary of human rights and employed the argumentation of women's and LGBTQIA+ rights used by civil society against discrimination and injustice. They demanded the protection of children—both unborn and born—and their rights. They deployed a similar strategy to demand the protection of pregnant women. Women were constructed as at risk of being physically and emotionally hurt by abortion or at risk of being forced to terminate their pregnancies against their will. Therefore, the anti-gender discourse went, steps needed to be taken to prevent family members or medical staff from putting pressure on women and to create sufficient space for women to make their own decisions, which should be respected. The assumption that women would not want to terminate their pregnancies if they had a choice underpinned many of the arguments presented. Preventing/restricting abortion was also considered to be a question of national and European identity: Slovak children were described as part of an old European civilization that should be protected from non-Catholic nations and immigrants coming from the East. Such a construction enables nationalist, ethno-populist, far-right, and anti-abortion discourses to overlap. These demands for cultural recognition relate to discussions about *who* should be considered a member of a community (un/born child, pregnant woman, white/non-white, or Slovak/foreign pregnant woman).

Other demands articulated under the umbrella demand for protection of life connect cultural recognition with material redistribution. These include demands such as psychological and material support for women who have been raped, support for women who do not want to have children (including anonymous childbirth, financial support, and housing), etc. Other demands focus solely on material support, requesting better family policies, economic support for poor (employed) women and families, social and material support for elderly and sick people, and improving "quality of life" for families. These social and economic demands relate to inequalities in Slovakia and the everyday experiences of many people, including unaffordable housing, insufficient social networks, and an individualized and feminized system of care. In the political arena, these issues have remained unaddressed for years. Moreover, the only political party in the parliament (and, between 2020 and 2022, in the government) that has systematically supported access to safe and legal abortion and the rights of LGBTQIA+ people is Sloboda a solidarita (Freedom and solidarity), which pursues individualist and business-oriented policies. An illustration of the party's approach can be found in its leader's media claims:

> This is the malaise of all political parties today—more redistribution, giving away….We say that it is not good when the state gets bigger and bigger and bigger and when it organizes people's lives more and more. We say, let us do it the other way. Let's give people freedom, let's allow them to better create values. (TA3, 2016)

Therefore, while the political agenda pursuing the recognition of "traditional families" was actively connected with social and economic issues, the agenda supporting sexual and reproductive justice, as well as the recognition of LGBTQIA+ people, was rather vocally supported by political actors pursuing neoliberal and austerity policies.

The last set of demands that can be identified in the anti-gender discourse in Slovakia stresses individual and state autonomy and is built around opposition to the EU, UN, and other potential international institutions that supposedly do not respect "Slovak traditional values." Claiming to represent the authentic voice of the Slovak people, those who articulate this set of demands request representation in the national and international political arena.

In this consolidated chain of demands, the demand to protect life was not mere resentment and demand for cultural recognition of "unborn children," but rather represented further demands for material redistribution and political representation. In the process of repeated articulation of various demands, the anti-gender actors named some of the insecurities that were created in the process of economic and political transformation that followed the fall of the state-socialist regime. They addressed the failures of the global liberal order and neoliberal policies and created a new political, cultural, and social alternative. When demanding the protection of life (and, similarly, the protection of family and other demands), the anti-gender actors formulated an "illiberal offer" based on such values as family, paid work, and nation.

The Connection between Anti-Gender Politics and Illiberalism

It is this equivalential chain of demands, constructed as an "illiberal offer," that connects anti-gender politics and illiberalism. Pointing to the failures of liberalism and its cultural and economic policies, anti-gender politics "proposes solutions that are majoritarian, nation-centric or sovereigntist, favoring traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity," as Marlene Laruelle concludes. The shift from politics to culture—identified by Laruelle as one of the five features of illiberalism—seems to be more complex. In the analyzed anti-gender discourse, actors sometimes framed political issues in terms of culture (different reasons for abortion), but at other times politicized issues that liberal or progressive actors had articulated in terms of morality (such as the human rights consensus). Thus, the interplay between politics and morality seems to be shaped by both progressive and illiberal actors.

The case of anti-abortion discourse in Slovakia illustrates the connection between anti-gender and illiberal politics, a connection that extends beyond Slovak borders. It provides insight into the concrete demands of illiberal politics and suggests that a new collective subject is constructed around these demands. The new (illiberal) collective subject is internally diverse and politically fluid, as it is constructed not around identities but rather around needs and demands. If we take this understanding seriously, it necessarily calls into question the current opposition to both anti-gender and illiberal politics and suggests that a complex progressive offer needs to be made as an alternative—one that would be centered around unmet needs and political demands articulated across populations.

Notes

[1] If the law does not gain support in Parliament, according to the Rules of Procedure of the Slovak Parliament, another vote on the same matter cannot be held for at least six months.

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