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# The Family and the Nation: The Centrality of Gender Politics in the Rise of European Illiberalism

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper analyzes how illiberal far-right parties employ discourses of traditional family values to advocate a range of anti-feminist, anti-queer, and anti-sexual education stances that have become critical in European national politics. Illiberal politicians use the concept of "traditional family" to reassert heteronormative ideas of gender and sexuality that advance their majoritarian, nationalist, and anti-pluralist platforms while infringing on the rights and freedoms of gender and sexual minorities. I explore three realms where this family-centered rhetoric presents itself in policy and political movements—gender roles and reproduction, LGBTQ+ rights, and sexual education—and analyze relevant actors, movements, and policies demonstrating the central role of anti-gender discourse in amassing illiberal support. Two case studies, Italy and Poland, illustrate how anti-gender rhetoric and family-centered discourse are at the core of the party platforms of two of Europe's most illiberal governments, and are central to their expressed ideals of national identity.

## **KEYWORDS**

gender, illiberalism, familialism, far-right, national identity

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s, anti-gender campaigns have swept across Europe in response to the gain made by feminist and LGBTQ+ movements in recent decades. Opposition to what has been termed “gender ideology” by right-wing parties is concerned with the rejection of various ideas, including marriage equality, sex education, reproductive technology, abortion, gender studies, transgender rights, and gender identity. Often making claims that equate “gender ideology” to Leftist indoctrination or Marxist propaganda, the movement has made swift progress in rolling back many of the achievements of queer and feminist emancipatory politics in recent decades. This paper explores how anti-gender rhetoric manifests itself in the illiberal project, primarily through discourses surrounding the idea of the “traditional family.” I argue that the family-centered rhetoric propagated by far-right leaders is a crucial mechanism by which illiberal parties present their platforms and advance their vision of national identity.

Broadly, illiberalism refers to an ideology that rejects the ideas of liberal democracy. In many ways, it is a reaction to what many perceive to be the “excesses” of liberalism and its pervasive emphasis on individualism and its championing of multiculturalism, pluralism, and globalism. While illiberalism primarily affects the economic and political realms, this paper is concerned with the social demands of illiberal ideology. Illiberal actors exploit the broad social fears and anxieties experienced by many of those who have lived and are living through the uncertainties of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and appeal to them by offering “solutions that are majoritarian, nation-centric or sovereigntist, favoring traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity” (Laurelle, 2022, p. 304). Perhaps the most well-known example of illiberal anti-pluralism is the restriction of or advocating for restricting immigration. However, just as illiberal actors advocate for tighter immigration policies to advance their vision of a homogenous culture and national identity, they also impose their homogenous, anti-pluralist vision by advancing a specific image of the family, gender roles, and sexuality.

Anti-gender discourse has become the ideational core through which illiberal actors present their vision of the family, the social order, and national identity. Illiberal politicians cast the rhetoric of gender and sexuality as a metaphor for the excesses of liberal individualism, which prioritizes the individual need for validation and recognition rather than the collective good of the family and society (Pető, 2022). By constructing “gender ideology” as a threat to society’s moral fabric and mongering fear of the “dying nation,” illiberal parties campaign on promises to revive it by restoring the traditional family (Szelewa, 2021). By villainizing progressive ideas about gender, silencing sexual minorities, and promoting traditional gender roles, gender discourse becomes an integral part of the anti-pluralist and illiberal majoritarian project and is inextricably linked to the fight for reclaiming national identity. In practice, this discourse manifests itself in both policy and movements that promote the curbing of progressive gender policies, LGBTQ+ rights, and inclusive sexual education in schools—serving to reaffirm heteronormative ideas about gender, sex, and sexuality.

This paper uses the term “gender” to refer to gender identity—a person’s sense of identification, or lack of identification, with the sex prescribed to them at birth and the norms associated with such (Pető, 2022). The modern anti-gender movement has its roots in the Vatican’s reaction to the use of the term “gender” in international treaties on women’s rights in the 1990s. Anti-genderism has become deeply entrenched in far-right politics and is a crucial platform on which illiberal politicians campaign for mass support (Graff,

2021). Anti-gender campaigns present the concept of gender as “a force responsible for the denaturalization of the sexual order” (Graff, 2021, p. 267), which presents itself as an attack on a range of issues relating to gender and sexuality, including sexual health and reproductive rights, inclusive sexual education in schools, and rights for sexual minorities (Hodzic & Bijelic, 2014). The concept of “gender ideology” emerges from this movement, framing progressive gender policies as the invention of a corrupt and dangerous liberal elite equated to a “totalitarian ideology” (Graff, 2021). It has proven to be a salient strategy for illiberal actors to capitalize on fears and anxieties about rapid social change. Citizens are drawn to the call to save what they fear is at risk—the family, the foundation of the nation, and national identity. This has allowed them to succeed in challenging feminist and LGBTQ+ social movements and undermining gender and sexuality equality.

The rest of this paper seeks to demonstrate how illiberal actors leverage discourses surrounding gender, sexuality, and family values and policies that reaffirm the traditional family to build public support, resulting in restrictions on the freedoms of women and sexual minorities and reduced access to sexual education. This paper identifies three realms where anti-genderism presents itself in policy and mass political movements—gender roles and reproduction, LGBTQ+ rights, and sexual education—and will analyze relevant actors, movements, and policies demonstrating the central role of anti-gender discourse in amassing illiberal support. The paper will conclude with two brief case studies that assess the gender rhetoric and policies of Poland’s Law and Justice (PiS) and the Brothers of Italy parties to illustrate how anti-gender rhetoric is used in these three areas and is central to the project each party promotes.

## **2. FAMILIALISM, GENDER ROLES, AND REPRODUCTION**

Just over five years ago, Viktor Orbán announced that 2018 would be Hungary’s “Year of the Family” (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018). This declaration aptly symbolizes how illiberal politicians seek to position the family at the center of national and political life. Illiberal actors often achieve this through the rhetoric and policies of familialism. Familialism refers to the “strictly standardized image of a functioning family as the foundation of the nation” (Kemper, 2014, p. 13). Under this model, individual reproductive and self-determination rights are subjugated to the normative demand of the reproduction of the nation. Often presented alongside the rhetoric of a “dying nation” in reference to declining birth rates, it becomes the women’s obligation to ensure the nation’s survival by birthing and raising children. Thus, familialism is inextricably linked to traditional gender roles, in which it is the man’s job to provide, and the women’s role is to reproduce.

The obligation for women to ensure the nation’s survival through procreation is evident in the discursive strategy of illiberal campaigns. The demographic crisis narrative and centrality of the traditional family are reflected in party platforms, such as that of Germany’s Alternative for Deutschland (AfD). The AfD understands the traditional family as “the heterosexual married couple with biological children and a gendered division of labor,” and this definition is the guiding principle of the party’s gender policy (Hajek, 2020). The AfD evokes the threat of demographic crisis to promote the protection of the white, heteronormative family, and to stimulate higher birth rates by the native population. A campaign poster from the 2017 elections depicts a white pregnant woman and reads, “New Germans? We’ll make them ourselves,” demonstrating a commitment to the traditional family, the nation, and reproduction, that ties into the illiberal theme of cultural nativism. As much as illiberal actors are concerned with curbing immigration and promoting a homogenous sense

of national identity, this too extends to preserving and procreating this national identity from within (Hajek, 2020).

The approach to familialism is two-fold. While it is a discursive strategy of campaigns such as Hungary's "Year of the Family" and Germany's "Initiative for the Protection of the Family," it is also carried out through welfare policies that incentivize child-bearing and underscore the preference for women as caregivers. Such familialist policies reveal a deeply gendered vision of care work, and the conditions to receive financial assistance are also highly gender-based. In countries such as Hungary and Poland, this looks like strengthening family-related cash transfers at the expense of investment in care services (Szelewa, 2021). This policy essentially "pays" caregivers (typically women) to stay home and raise children rather than funding childcare centers, preschools, and other institutions that can provide care services to support two working parents. In Hungary, women can retire after 40 years, and years spent on maternity leave count as years of "work," while years spent in education, for example, do not (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018). The government also strengthened tax breaks for families with three or more children—the overall support in cash for mothers with at least three children is equivalent to receiving a minimum wage (Szelewa, 2021).

These policies appeal to families, and particularly to women, because they appear to elevate the status of care work. These policies recognize and compensate for women's contributions in the home and reproductive spheres—the lack of this recognition is a common grievance against liberalism (Pető, 2022). However, these policies simultaneously assert the preference for women in the home and actively limit their ability to pursue a career while raising a family. It is possible to acknowledge that these policies can positively affect women, families, and birth rates while recognizing that they oppose the goals of the liberal feminist movement. Family benefits provide an economic cushion for working-class families they would not otherwise receive. However, the way that these policies are designed takes funds away from investment in public childcare institutions and presupposes that women are the ones in the home taking care of the children, effectively prioritizing women as mothers over citizens with equal rights.

The familialist narrative is also at the center of arguments for restrictions on reproductive rights. In 2020, the *Geneva Consensus Declaration on Promoting Women's Health and Strengthening the Family* was signed by Poland and co-sponsored by Hungary. This declaration demonstrates how limiting access to abortion, affirming women's critical role in the family, and ensuring the nation's survival are all viewed as intimately connected. The declaration pledges to support "the role of the family as foundational to society" and reaffirms "women's contribution to the welfare of the family and the development of society." Further, it emphasizes that "in no case should abortion be promoted as a means of family planning" and reaffirms that "there is no international right to abortion" ("Geneva Consensus Declaration," 2020). Thus, using a familialist framework, restrictions on abortion are justified from the perspective that women are essential to the family, the family is the foundation of the nation, and the survival of both relies on female reproduction (Mancini & Palazzo, 2021).

The anti-abortion manifestos of the illiberal leaders in Hungary and Poland are meted out in policies that block access to reproductive care, while movements across Europe spread similar messages through anti-feminist and misogynistic rhetoric. A recent law regulating abortion in Hungary, known as the fetal heartbeat rule, requires women to listen to the fetal heartbeat before accessing the procedure (Strzyzynska, 2022). Furthermore, in Spain, anti-abortion protests sponsored by the anti-choice organization "Yes to Life" attracted millions

of supporters to the Spanish capital in 2019. Of notable appearance were members of Spain's Vox party, whose platform is rooted in the objection to abortion and a commitment to "protect the family" (Madden, 2019). The party is committed to ending public funding for abortions and shutting down what it describes as "radical feminist organizations," and party leader Francisco Serrano Castro has claimed he is proud to be labeled "machista" if it means defending life (Madden, 2019). Thus, illiberal parties like AfD and Vox, and ruling regimes like those in Hungary and Poland, utilize the rhetoric of family values to reject feminist emancipatory politics and undermine gender equality.

### 3. RESTRICTING LGBTQ+ RIGHTS

In 2021, Viktor Orban declared that Hungary would provide "a home to European citizens... who have not descended into LGBTQ lunacy" (Mancini & Palazzo, 2021, p. 403). This rejection of sexual diversity is a common theme throughout illiberal campaigns and regimes. The exclusion of LGBTQ+ persons from certain freedoms, such as marriage, adoption, and alternative reproduction procedures, ties into the larger narrative of what illiberal actors label an assault on the traditional family. Sexual diversity, i.e., anyone who does not identify as heterosexual or with their biological sex, is linked with the perceived erosion of the family, which is "discursively and effectively linked to the erosion of society" (Hajek, 2020).

Conservative discourse links the loss of the heteronormative family with social anarchy. As stated by Anette Scultner, chairperson of AfD's Christian Initiative in Germany, "the social and biological sustainability of every society depends on these complementary genders" (Hajek, 2020). Under this perspective, the traditional family is the bedrock of society since it ensures not only biological reproduction but societal and cultural reproduction as well. Only the heteronormative family can ensure the procreation of national identity, while sexual and gender pluralism threatens society's survival. Thus, it becomes necessary to "erase" deviant individuals who do not uphold the normative ideals of gender and family because these individuals pose a threat to culture, society, and the very essence of national identity (Mancini & Palazzo, 2021).

The "erasure" of sexual minorities is often accomplished by limiting the ability of non-heterosexual couples to form families and have children, thus ensuring they cannot reproduce. In some countries, this looks like constitutional revisions that define marriage explicitly as between a man and a woman. In 2013, Croatia underwent a constitutional referendum that defined marriage this way, resulting in an effective ban on same-sex marriage (Hodzic & Bijelic, 2014). Similarly, in Hungary, the Fundamental Law that went into effect in 2020 declares, "Hungary shall protect the institution of marriage as the union of a man and a woman" because the family is "the basis of their nation's survival" (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018, p. 167). Same-sex couples can also no longer adopt children in Hungary, as Orbán passed legislation restricting adoption to married couples.

Europe's far-right has also mobilized thousands of citizens in protest against equal rights for sexual minorities, including their ability to have children. The "La Manif Pour Tous" movement in France, best known for its mass protests against same-sex marriage in 2013, also opposes assisted reproductive technologies and surrogacy for same-sex couples. In 2020, tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Paris to protest a bill that would extend government-subsidized artificial insemination to single women and lesbian couples. The group justified its position using family-centered rhetoric, stating that surrogate motherhood and artificial insemination would "deprive children of a father for their entire lives"

(Williams, 2020). Campaigns like “La Manif Pour Tous” are also mobilizing across Europe. The French movement has inspired branches of the organization to pop up across Europe. “La Manif Pour Tous” also founded the campaign “Europe for Family,” which, in 2014, got 230 French candidates for European Parliament to sign onto “principles” opposing trans rights, marriage equality, and sexual education in schools (Bijelic & Hodzic, 2014).

Attacks on sexual minorities also take form in attempts to limit the visibility of LGBTQ+ identities and movements, including civil society organizations. In 2020, Hungary’s Parliament approved a law that banned transgender people from changing their sex assigned at birth on legal documents (BBC, 2020b). In 2021, Victor Orban’s Fidesz party drafted legislation that would ban LGBTQ+ literature for those under 18 (including educational materials and advertisements seen as promoting gay rights (BBC, 2021b). Last year, the Hungarian Supreme Court fined two LGBTQ+ civil society organizations for opposing a recent referendum that limited public discussion of sexual orientation and transgender issues (Thoreson, 2022). In Spain, the right-wing Vox party is well-known for its homophobic rhetoric and sexual intolerance. It has pledged to curtail gay pride parades and has compared homosexuality to bestiality (Carreño, 2019). Parties like Vox have provided an ideological base for those members of the conservative right who do not resonate with the traditional establishment that has historically been relatively tolerant, and are swayed by the rhetoric of protecting the family and saving the children from LGBTQ indoctrination. These ideas are taking root not only where they are codified by illiberal governments, but also where illiberal parties spread their message and gain influence across the continent under the guise of protecting the “natural” family order.

#### **4. THE WAR ON GENDER STUDIES AND SEXUAL EDUCATION**

The third realm in which the anti-gender movement manifests itself as a core part of the illiberal project is in what can be described as the war on gender studies and sexual education. Rather than emphasizing policies that target the family or sexual minorities concretely, the campaign against “gender ideology” targets efforts to teach about inclusive sexual education or use gender as a framework for understanding the world and the power structures that govern it (i.e., gender studies as an academic discipline). By targeting the ways gender is talked and taught about, primarily to youth, illiberal actors seek to control the very discourse surrounding gender and reassert the male-female binary as the normative structure of society.

Once again, the argument behind these measures is ‘protecting the family’ and, more specifically, ‘protecting children.’ Illiberals succeed in doing this by discursively linking the loss of family values and the corruption of youth by an insidious “liberal agenda.” Right-wing parties invoke examples of progressive sexual education to villainize liberal elites as trying to indoctrinate and pervert children, likening the “gender theory” that permeates sexual education textbooks to a “totalitarian ideology” more dangerous and oppressive than Marxism (Corredor, 2019). In Spain, members of Vox have criticized schools for encouraging “boys to try to be girls,” and have stated that “certain laws of ideological nature are ... imposing gender ideology on our kids” (Carreño, 2019). Germany’s AfD has also taken a staunch anti-sexual education approach, evoking an image of the overreaching liberal state violating the family sphere and harming one’s children. Right-wing actors contend that state-imposed sexual education “grabs for the children to sexualize and reeducate them” and have even likened school curricula to the sexual abuse of children (Hajek, 2020). Under this narrative, illiberal actors are painted as benevolent protectors, saving society from perver-



sion by what is “unnatural” and painting themselves as the vanguard of wholesome family values, providing an attractive lure around which society can mobilize. Prompted by the AfD’s gender platform, the “Initiative for Protection of the Family” led marches to protest the integration of topics of sexual diversity and nonnormative relationships into curricula for school children (Hajek, 2020).

The war on sexual education is also present in France. In 2011, eighty MPs mobilized in opposition to a new biology textbook that defined gender as a social construct rather than a biological fact. They claimed that the theory presented in the book “risks destabilizing young people and adolescents and altering their development,” reiterating that anything that challenges the heteronormative order is evil, dangerous, and threatening (Corredor, 2019, p. 613). A few years later, France canceled a gender equality program entitled “ABCD of equality,” which was intended to support teachers in addressing gender stereotyping in schools (Corredor, 2019). The mobilization against progressive sexual education in France stimulated similar campaigns across Europe, all rooted in the same gender ideology rhetoric and promoting fear of the moral deprivation of society, the family, and the nation’s youth.

Assaults on gender are also carried out at the university level. In Germany, AfD has pledged to discontinue all gender studies funding, university appointments, and research. In 2019, Viktor Orbán did just that by removing gender studies Master’s and Ph.D. programs from the list of accredited subjects in the country. The action also rescinded accreditation and funding for gender studies programs at two of the top universities in the country, Eotvos Lorand University and Central European University, stating that the discipline was “an ideology, not a science” (Prager, 2019). In Bulgaria, a UNESCO project proposal on gender equality in schooling was blocked by the education ministry, and a gender-related conference at the University of Verona in Italy was canceled after a far-right group threatened to shut the event down by force (Apperly, 2019). This growing war on gender studies is central to the illiberal focus on national identity. Gender studies as an academic discipline teaches gender as a social construct rather than a biological fact, challenging the strict gender binary and emphasis on the traditional family that are central to the illiberal worldview. The recognition of gender fluidity destabilizes the very core of society: the heteronormative family. Consequently, anyone who teaches an understanding of society not centered around a male-female binary and heteronormative family is an enemy of the nation. In this way, gender, sexuality, and the family are all linked together as a part of something larger—illiberal actors discursively and effectively use these ideas to elicit broad fears of a crumbling social order, with “gender ideology” being the overarching enemy that must be eliminated.

## **5. THE LAW AND JUSTICE (PiS) APPROACH TO GENDER & FAMILY VALUES**

Poland’s PiS party demonstrates how familialist policies, the restriction of LGBTQ+ rights, and attacks on “gender ideology” are embedded in the rhetorical strategy and policy implementation of illiberal governments. In 2016, PiS launched the Family 500 Plus plan, which exemplifies the party’s family-centered approach through its preference for traditional gender roles and emphasis on reproduction. The project, aimed at reversing the country’s “negative demographic trend,” offers families a monthly cash transfer of 500 PLN for every second and subsequent child until they turn 18 (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018). PiS’s approach to the distribution of family benefits is also profoundly gendered. In 2018, the retirement age was lowered to 65 for men and 60 for women. The policy was intended to reinstate women’s care potential and thus help rebuild multigenerational households (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018). Additionally, mothers of at least four children receive the right to a basic pen-



sion (Szelewa, 2021). It is worth acknowledging that this policy has been received quite positively and includes significant benefits for families. In 2017, 77% of Polish voters viewed the Family 500 Plus plan favorably (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018). Despite its positive reception and tangible benefits, PiS's family policy demonstrates how the illiberal, family-centered model promotes mothers-as-caregivers and undermines feminist advancement—all while gaining mass support in the process.

PiS has also been at the forefront of spreading anti-gender and LGBTQ+ rhetoric, making it a focal point of its platform on protecting the traditional family as a pillar of national identity. Polish president Andrew Duda, has called homosexuality an ideology “even more destructive than communism,” and PiS party leader Jarosław Kaczyński formerly stated that gender and LGBTQ+ movements equate with “a direct attack on the family and children” (Apperly, 2019). During his re-election campaign, Duda signed a “Family Charter,” which included pledges to prevent same-sex marriage and adoption, and ban teaching about LGBTQ+ issues in schools.

These discursive strategies have tangible consequences. In 2020, nearly a third of Poland, accounting for around 100 towns and regions across the country, declared themselves “LGBT Free Zones” (Ash, 2020). While these zones are not legally sanctioned, they force the sexual minorities living within them to either emigrate or live in fear and silence. While same-sex marriage is not legally recognized in Poland, the situation for LGBTQ+ persons in Poland has further deteriorated with the passage of a law in 2021 that prevents same-sex couples from adopting children, even as single parents (Baczynska & Włodarczak-Semczuk, 2021). This reality attests to the strength of illiberal leaders' anti-LGBTQ+ discourse and exposes the tangible consequences of homophobic rhetoric.

PiS's affliction with sexuality as “a threat to traditional life” extends to the debate over sexual education as well. In 2018, PiS condemned a sex education program approved by the World Health Organization that taught about sexual orientation in Warsaw, stating it infringed on “traditional Catholic values” (Savage, 2020). In 2019, the authors of the “Stop Pedophilia” bill that calls for the imprisonment of people who promoted underage sex, stated that sex educators are often people who “groom and familiarize children with homosexuality” (Savage, 2020). The proposed bill is understood to target the teaching of sexual education in schools, which leaders repeatedly rhetorically link with LGBTQ+ indoctrination—a dangerous ideology that threatens national identity. Poland offers a robust case study of how a ruling party effectively appeals to the desire to restore traditional family values as part of the nation's fundamental identity. In doing so, they can successfully demonize any perceived threat to the natural order while infringing on minority rights and increasingly creating a heteronormative social order.

## **6. ITALY, THE FAR RIGHT, AND GIORGIA MELONI**

In September 2022, Italy elected the most right-wing Italian government since World War II. In the same elections, Giorgia Meloni, leader of the Brothers of Italy party, became the country's first female prime minister. Winning 26% of the vote in an election with a “record-low” turnout, the Brothers of Italy became the largest party in Parliament (Kirby, 2022). Giorgia Meloni has made headlines and garnered substantial support for her staunchly right-wing platform founded on Euroscepticism, anti-immigration, and the rejection of “gender ideology” (NPR, 2022). Giorgia Meloni and the Italian far-right demonstrate how the protection of the traditional family is utilized to wage attacks on reproductive rights, the rights of sexual minorities, and sexual education—all with the stated goal of preserving

national identity.

Italy has long been an outlier in Western Europe in terms of rights for sexual minorities. Gay marriage is not recognized by law, surrogacy is banned, and adoption and in vitro fertilization are only permitted for heterosexual couples, as they require a marriage. Despite lagging in sexual equality, Giorgia Meloni's platform is largely fueled by anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and threats to roll back the rights of sexual minorities. In her campaign, Meloni pledged to oppose surrogacy and adoption for gay couples, essentially promising to bar any attempts at progress. While in Parliament, Meloni submitted an amendment to the law that bans surrogacy in Italy to include a provision that would prohibit Italians from seeking the procedure abroad. She also connects with voters by appealing to heteronormative ideas about what constitutes the "family," echoing many of the rhetorical strategies formerly detailed in this report, such as that having a mother and father is "best for a child" (Bubola, 2022).

Meloni is not the first to express anti-gender sentiments in Italy. In 2013, an Italian branch of "La Manif Pour Tous" was founded. The organization has actively mobilized Italian citizens against sexual education programs about gender equality. The movement also opposes legislation that includes sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression as the basis for discrimination (Hodzic & Bijelic, 2014). In 2015, the organization became "Generation Family" and organized annual "Family Days" in the subsequent years to protest the legalization of civil unions for same-sex couples, their central claim being that the family is founded on the union of a man and a woman. In 2016, Italy's interior minister Angelino Alfano claimed that "surrogacy is the most vile, illegal trade that man has invented," claiming that it subverts traditional family values and that surrogate parents should be "treated like sex offenders and sent to prison," rhetorically linking sexual minorities, or any individual seeking an alternative reproduction procedure, to a criminal (BBC, 2016).

The Brothers of Italy Party has strong connections to the right-wing Lega, which instilled a legacy of familialist and anti-gender policies in Italy prior to the Brothers' ascent. The League, founded in 1989, became a radical right party under the leadership of Matteo Salvini in 2013. As a national party, the League promoted two critical goals in its electoral platform: reaffirming the centrality of the traditional family in everyday life, and combatting low fertility rates. Its familialist, chauvinist, and homophobic rhetoric attracted the label of the "Polish drift of Italy" (Meardi & Guardiancich, 2021). When Lega led the nation as a part of a coalition government, childrearing was incentivized by increasing "natality benefits" for newborns by 2%, starting with the second child and increasing nursing subsidies from 1000 to 1500 euros per year. Reaffirming the Italian right's commitment to traditional gender roles and solidifying women's primary role as caretakers, the right-wing government abolished a 600 euro-a-month subsidy for babysitting or childcare costs for mothers opting out of parental leave due to work obligations (Meardi & Guardiancich, 2021). Once again, these policies are attractive to voters because they benefit mothers and families. However, their existence relies on cutting investment in childcare and other public services that would allow women to participate in the workforce *while* being mothers, demonstrating the illiberal right's anti-feminist policy shift.

The Lega has also pushed staunchly homophobic rhetoric that has had ripple effects throughout society. In 2019, LGBTQ+ rights groups linked a rise in hate crimes to the prominence of Lega and the homophobic comments of its members (Giuffrida, 2020). In 2020, an attempt to amend an anti-discrimination law that would make violence against

LGBTQ+ people and misogyny illegal, was virulently opposed by right-wing leaders and was eventually voted down. By then, the Brothers of Italy had become a political partner of the League, and the two parties co-organized counter-protests against the legislation. Now Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni claimed that the law would “suppress the freedom of expression,” while Matteo Salvini stated, “I’m here to defend the right of a child to have a mother and a father. Tomorrow, I do not want to be tried for family rights” (Giuffrida, 2020).

Now that Meloni and the Brothers of Italy are in power, the party’s anti-gay, anti-choice, and anti-sex education rhetoric shows no signs of waning. Meloni and the Brothers of Italy have consistently promoted “preventing” legal terminations of pregnancy in order to increase the birth rate (Tranchina, 2022). The Councilor of Piedmont, a member of Brothers of Italy, has proposed giving a monetary incentive of 4,000 euros for women not to have an abortion (Giuffrida, 2022). Meloni has also called for a ban on sex education in schools, claiming that the teaching of “gender ideology” is aimed at the disappearance of women as mothers (Bubola, 2022). In addition to her opposition to same-sex marriage and adoption, Meloni has attacked LGBTQ+ representation in children’s cartoons as being a part of the “LGBT lobby” (Tranchina, 2022).

By arguing that protecting the rights of sexual minorities constitutes an assault on the family and traditional values, Giorgia Meloni and the Italian right demonstrate that the goal of the majoritarian illiberal project is to limit minority rights. Despite her campaign slogan promising to “govern for everyone,” it is clear that “everyone” does not include sexual minorities or women. Instead, Italy’s illiberal regime tries to present a compelling narrative of saving the nation and its identity through rhetoric that spews hate and policies that limit the full participation of women and sexual minorities in the economic and social spheres.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

This paper has explored how anti-gender rhetoric is a central to illiberal party narratives, focusing specifically on how the image of the “traditional family” as a symbol of national identity is used to villainize progressive ideas relating to gender and sexuality. Illiberal actors campaign by promising to restore the sanctity of the traditional family, which includes asserting traditional gender roles of women as caregivers and using attractive family policies to push their conservative agenda. Illiberal actors emphasize the responsibility of women to ensure not only the reproduction of the family unit but of the nation as a whole. Using this logic, often in tandem with the rhetoric of declining birth rates and “demographic crises,” illiberal actors spread anti-abortion sentiment and actively limit access to reproductive care. Illiberal actors also target the rights of LGBTQ persons, criticizing any family structure that does not reflect marriage as between a man and a woman as “unnatural” and thus contrary to national values and identity. Further, illiberal actors use homophobic rhetoric and seek to limit LGBTQ rights through legislative means to erase “deviant individuals” from the national polity. Finally, illiberal actors target gender studies and sexual education by constructing these topics as part of an insidious liberal agenda that is indoctrinating and perverting the nation’s youth. As illiberal tendencies continue to rise across Europe, addressing why such rhetorical tactics effectively garner substantial support for these parties is crucial. It is equally as important to recall the principles that liberal democracy and the European Union were founded upon to defend gender equality, human rights, and tolerance.

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